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War and After War: The Great War and its Aftermath in a Tasmanian
Region: The Huon, 1914-1926.


Chris Martin B.A.Hons., M. Hum (History).

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of
Arts.

University of Tasmania
Hobart July 1992.

(II)

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma in any university and that, to the best of this candidate's knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no copy or paraphrase of material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Acknowledgments

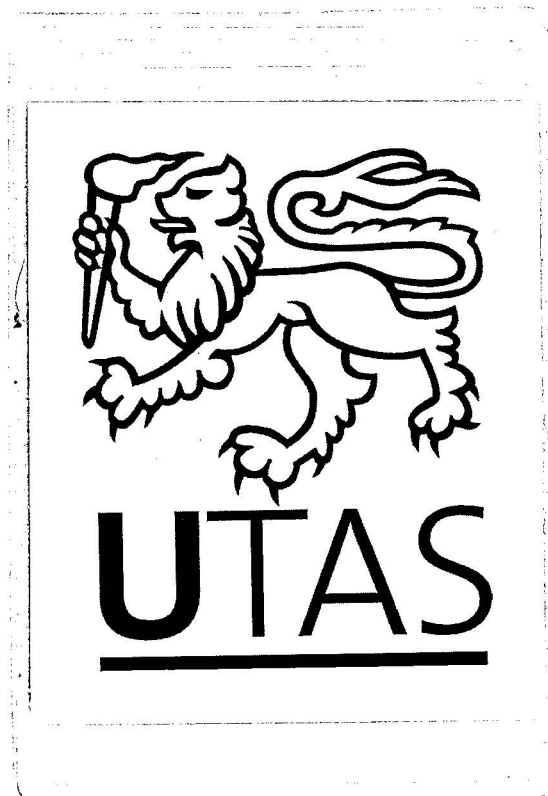
I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following people and institutions: the ever helpful staff of the Archives Office of Tasmania and the Tasmaniana Library; Monica Vincent, whose unstinting help and assistance proved invaluable; Isolde Marsh, whose urgings started me on the path to this work; Roger Rooke and Peter Davies for their generous advice about the use of computers; Andrew Hamilton and Sue Harvey-Latham for their encouragement and generous comments; Jean (dec) and Len Bushell of the Huon Valley Apple Museum, their special help was much appreciated; Des Latham, Editor of the *Huon News*, for his enormous generosity in allowing me open access to bound back-issues of the *Huon Times*.

I would like to offer special acknowledgment to Professor Michael Roe for his perceptive and positive advice, calmness in the face of adversity and general good humour towards my failings and errors. His attention to detail provides a benchmark for all would be researchers such as myself.

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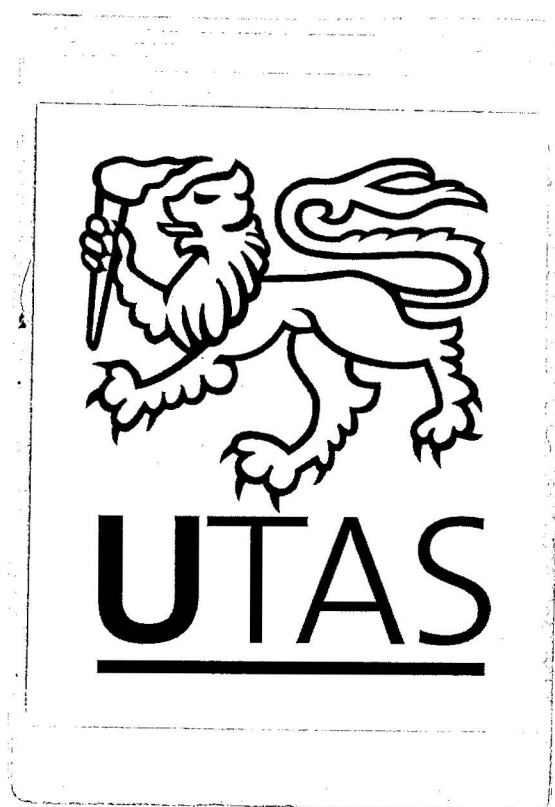
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A.B.	Records of the Agricultural Bank
A.W.U.	Australian Workers Union
C.P.P.	Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers
C.S.B.	Closer Settlement Board
L.S.D.	Records of the Lands and Surveys Department
PD.	Records of the Premiers Department
P.H.F.C.	Port Huon Fruitgrowers Cooperative
RC/1	Records of the 1926 Royal Commission into Soldier Settlement
R.S.L.	Returned Servicemens' League
THRAPP	Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings
T.J.P.P.	Tasmanian Journals and Papers of Parliament.

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Abstract

On the eve of World War One the Huon felt itself to be on the threshold of a bright and prosperous future. The recent rapid increase in the export of its apples and timber had led the region's "boosters" to believe that the long, dark night of the 1890s depression was at an end. Such new found vitalism was soon translated into plans for the construction of a rail link to Hobart, an overseas wharf at Port Huon, the dredging of the Huon River to Franklin and the development of a diverse range of industries for the area.

Such hopes were soon dashed by the European conflict of 1914-1918. Despite, perhaps because of, the Huon's remoteness, the region soon suffered the full effects of war; its overdependence on the export of apples and timber rendering it peculiarly vulnerable to any change in the international marketplace. As a consequence the Huon soon found itself a community under siege, held bondage in the grip of profound anxiety. Such tension was reflected in the region's bitter debates over conscription and recruitment; in the growing conflict between the worker and his employer; in the Huon's growing sense of isolation from main-stream political decision making and in the death of any pre-war optimism.

The first chapter of this thesis outlines the Huon's pre-war aspirations, describes the area's first reactions to the outbreak of World War One and notes the immediate effects of such conflict upon so fragile an economy.

Chapter two details the Tasmanian Government's first tentative steps towards a soldier settlement scheme and describes the Huon's less than favourable reaction to such plans.

Chapter three outlines the increasingly disastrous effect of the war upon the Huon; points to the growing divide between the area's self-declared loyalists and their predominantly unionist antagonists; notes the effect of such division in the 1916 referendum on conscription and details parliamentary debate over the passage of the Soldier Settlement Act of 1916.

Chapter four gives an account of the growing despondency that overwhelmed the Huon as the war continued, such despondency clearly evidenced by the near total collapse of the fruit industry in 1918 and the

hardening of the area's attitude to the war as evidenced by the size of the "no" vote in the conscription referendum of 1917. All hope was though not entirely lost and war's end brought renewed expectations of a prosperous future, though first experiences of resettlement gave pause to such hopes.

Chapter five outlines the Huon's fate in those unsettled years of the early 1920s. It was a period of great tension as orchardists sought to reestablish markets; as unemployment rose dramatically; as Ireland's problems saw reflection in the growth of Catholic antagonism towards the British Empire and as unionists sought better pay and working conditions. Such was the depth of despond that many left the Huon to seek employment elsewhere.

Chapter six details the mechanics of resettlement in the Huon, a process that doubtless typified wider Tasmanian experience, then explores the impact of resettlement upon state politics, suggesting the Labour Party's rise to power in 1923 to be largely the consequence of Nationalist party indecision, perhaps intransigence, towards the continued and ever deepening financial crisis posed by resettlement.

Chapter seven recounts the experiences of those soldiers who resettled in the Huon and evidences the Closer Settlement Board's varied attempts at overcoming those settlers' difficulties.

Chapter eight details both the background and findings of the Tasmanian Government's 1926 Royal Commission into soldier settlement, a minor study of the politics of the pragmatic.

Chapter nine discusses the final stage in the repatriation of the Huon's soldier settlers, Justice Herbert Pike's Federal enquiry into resettlement and considers factors which likely led to successful resettlement.

Introduction.

The following work presents a picture of near unrelieved depression. It is a tale of contrasts wherein the pre-war hopes of a small rural community and its soldier settlers meet the harsh reality of a post-war Tasmania. The bitterness of those post-war years was perhaps nowhere else more clearly exemplified than in the experiences of those soldiers who chose to resettle on orchards in the Huon at the end of the war: their experiences undoubtedly marking an extension rather than a cessation of war-time traumas. As such its telling presents a microcosmic view of the more general Tasmanian experience of that time.

When I began this thesis I had no intention of writing about soldier settlers in Tasmania following the Great War. I had instead intended to write of the Huon - under the loose title "From War to Depression." But as I began my research I found myself increasingly drawn towards some study of those men who had taken up properties in the area at the end of the war. Such a decision, while initially offering the happy convergence of two interests, soon posed serious structural problems for my thesis. On the one hand a study of the Huon between 1914-1929 offered useful contextual material for my soldier settlers: on the other hand the parameters of the study were too limiting to allow of a more detailed analysis of soldier settlers on a state-wide political and economic basis. The latter analysis was of course necessary if I was to place my settlers in some realistic perspective. My happy convergence of interests soon dissolved in the face of such wider considerations.

The dilemma now was how coherently and fluently to tell the tale of the Huon and its soldier settlers against the larger backdrop of the State's resettlement scheme and its political and economic consequences. I must concede that I have found it a dilemma, incapable of full resolution. That I had necessarily to continually shift my focus from issue of local Huon interest to matters of more state-wide relevance caused only great concern; nearly all of my attempts at incorporating both subject matters in the same chapters produced only confusion. Better, I considered, to treat specific issues as near separate entities - the telling of their stories in parallel hopefully producing a useful contrast of localised hopes and concerns against the larger context within which these hopes and concerns had to be judged. When it came to the necessary study of the workings of the Tasmanian soldier

settlement scheme I was left with little choice but to leave the Huon. Such digression was necessary if the experience of the Huon's settlers was to be fully understood. Such was also the case with Tasmania's Royal Commission and Justice Pike's Federal inquiry into soldier settlement. While the above explanation may not justify complete exoneration for my decisions it at least, I hope, offers some justification worthy of consideration.

The study of soldier settlement has received recent impetus from the publication of Lake's *Limits of Hope*; the mixed reviews the work attracted a warning to any one toiling in the field. While there is general agreement upon the historical background surrounding the establishment of soldier settlement at the Federal level there is widespread disagreement over its implementation within the various states and even as to limited groups - or even individuals. This disagreement extends to matters such as: the correct methodology to adopt in approaching soldier settlement files, the adequacy or otherwise of various sampling procedures, the correct appraisal of Australia's varied soldier settlement schemes, the significance of the "yeoman myth" and the scientific developments in farming in the 1920s and to the correct analysis of contemporary comment upon the soldier settlers themselves. Even discussion of the success or "failure" of individual settlers is sufficient to provoke argument. My research has shown such issues to pose deep, near intractable difficulties, for any would be student of soldier settlement. The temptation to generalize upon the experiences of individual settlers must needs be always tempered by the knowledge that one is, after all, studying a group as diverse as any one would find within the average community.

Perhaps the only way adequately to understand these settlers is to study them in their localized contexts: the task I have set myself. In this sense my work comes closest to that of L. M. Key's chapter on Closer Settlement in Neil Gunson's *The Good Country: Cranbourne Shire*¹, another story of soldier settlement in a local context. The present work makes no attempt to emulate Lake's state-wide approach. As with Key's study mine attempts to provide only a specific slice of the larger experience of soldier settlement - that being the unique experiences of the men who took up properties in the Huon.

¹ Gunson, N. (Ed). *The Good Country: Cranbourne Shire*, Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1968.

The uniqueness of those soldiers who returned to the Huon essentially stems from their common background and choice of properties. All but a few returned to the very place from which they had enlisted. As such their knowledge of local conditions was extensive. That they all chose to purchase ready made properties, often from parents or other close family members, also set them apart from the general run of Tasmanian settlers. They all took up orcharding and had all to confront extremely difficult times in the management of their properties. Their consequent high departure rate (73%), already higher than the state average of 61%², was significantly higher than the rate of departures in other states. This clearly set them apart from the experiences of most.

But the specificity of the study, as with Key's, does not preclude matters of larger moment. Indeed, it allows for some testing of those larger questions that surround the study of soldier settlement: in this case the work of J. M. Powell.³ It allows for a localised study of factors which may have determined a settler's success or departure: his background and experience, age, marital status, war-related injuries, access to capital, choice of property and the importance of family networks of assistance. While this work provides some data in response to Powell's call for more statistical information⁴, I must admit to certain reservations as to the value of such information. Reliable statistics are often difficult to come by. Any adequate determination of a settler's capital provides a simple case in point here. But a further reservation must lie in the fact that statistics too easily disguise the specific and determining experiences of the settlers. The one notable exception to the above would lie in the need for a much more detailed study of the role of illness among the settlers as I believe, along with Powell, that this would expose an important factor that caused the departure of many settlers.

My study also allows for some test of what Powell has emphasized as the "eight major characteristics of what was generally dubbed the "failure" of soldier settlers in Australia."⁵ drawn from various

² Figures derived from Pike's report: *Losses Due To Soldier Settlement*. C. P. P., Vol 2, 1929. Paper No. 46.

³ I have drawn upon various works by Powell, listed in my bibliography.

⁴ J. M. Powell, "The Debt of Honour: Soldier Settlement in the Dominions, 1915-1940", *Journal of Australian Studies* No 8, June 1981, pp 64-87.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp 65-71.

government reports of that time. Such failure was officially blamed upon: falling prices for farm produce, the high costs of plant and equipment, the burden of capital debt, the often inappropriate purchase of properties, the settlers' lack of a viable living area, the faulty manner in which settlers were selected, the near intractable difficulties surrounding Commonwealth-State relations and the very nature of the schemes under which the settlers languished. To a greater or lesser degree all of the above played their part in the departure of my settlers. But all such connections were ultimately related to the area to which my settlers returned, to the peculiar emphasis that the area placed upon orcharding and to the difficulties the area faced during the immediate post-war years. In turn those difficulties reflected the larger problems faced by Tasmania at this time.

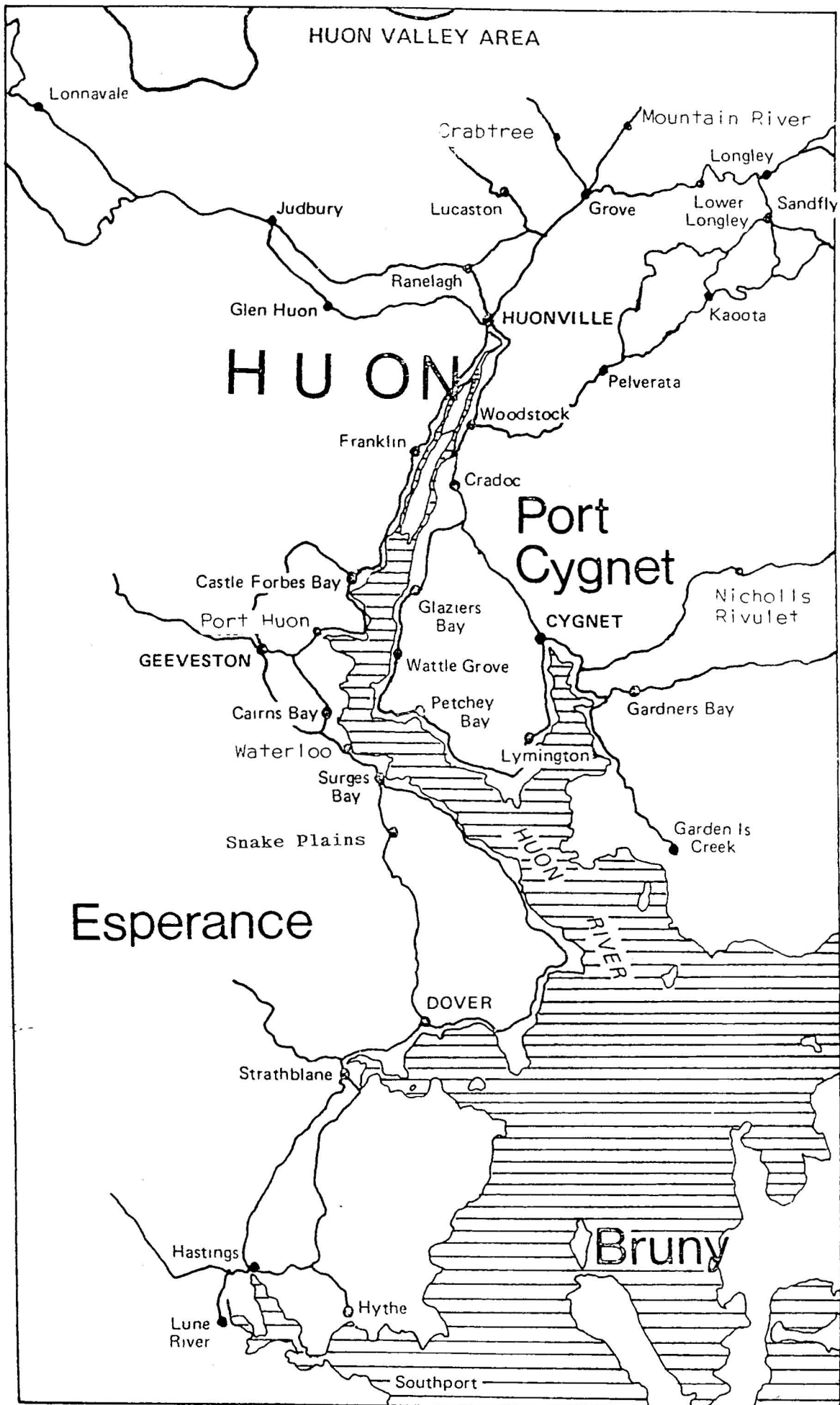
The Huon, to which the soldiers returned at the end of the war, lies some thirty miles south of Hobart, Tasmania's capital. Consistent european settlement did not occur in this area until the late 1830s - a comparatively late date considering the region's proximity to Hobart. The mountainous barrier of the Wellington ranges, the density of the Huon's forests and its seeming lack of readily available arable land ensured such a delayed process of development.

The region's early economic mainstay of timber, an activity which readily attracted the transient yet hardy settler, only served to reinforce the area's relative isolation. As if these economic and geographic factors were not of themselves sufficient factors of isolation from the rest of the state then the area's wide-spread convict base ensured its social separateness in the late 1840s, the very time when the anti-transportation movement was growing from strength to strength elsewhere. Of course the late development of the area necessitated such a presence - a cheap, if sometimes less than ideal, source of labour. But this convict presence cast its shadow over the region, adding further to its sense of isolation. Fellow Tasmanians soon came to regard the inhabitants of the Huon as a race apart - as indeed did many of its early settlers.

The Victorian gold-rush gave an enormous economic boost to the Huon; its timber widely used in Victoria's mines and Melbourne's burgeoning suburbs and docks. It was a short lived boom. At its end the Huon settled down to quiet penury. The Depression of the 1890s ensured such economic desperation would continue.

But hope at last arrived for the Huon in the form of "black spot". As this disease made survival increasingly difficult for northern orchardists the focus of the state's apple industry inexorably shifted southward. By the 1890s the Huon offered, albeit briefly, the final refuge from such a crippling disease.⁶ Consequently orcharding emerged as the predominant economic pursuit of many in the Huon. The apple industry breathed new life into the area, the early 1900s witness to a new found vitalism, a vitalism directly matched to the rapidly growing size of the region's apple exports. Such was the nature of this new found vitalism that the Huon, at the onset of war in 1914, believed itself to be on the threshold of an era of unlimited prosperity. Local "boosters pushed for such developments as a rail link to Hobart, the construction of an overseas wharf at Port Huon and the dredging of the Huon River to Franklin. There soon emerged the not unusual belief that the area's growing prosperity underpinned that of Hobart's. The Hobart fruit canneries and pulping plants were largely reliant upon the Huon's successful orcharding, the port of Hobart only truly alive during the apple season. Indeed, many in the Huon soon came to view Hobart as a parasite, feeding off the area's good fortunes and hard labours. But the conflict in Europe signalled an end to such hopes, an end that forms the basis of the following thesis. It was a passing made more bitter by the experiences of those who returned after having offered themselves in the name of Empire, an Empire that offered precious little to those who had served in its name.

⁶ Goodhand, W. E., "Pome fruit Orcharding in Tasmania: Its evolution and Present Geographical Basis", unpublished M. A. dissertation, University of Tasmania, 1960.



Regional Aspirations: Cherished in Peace, Threatened by War.

In 1914 some eleven thousand people lived in the Huon. Though it lay only thirty miles south of the capital city of Hobart the area felt itself to be isolated from and neglected by the rest of Tasmania. Although a reasonable road link had been established to Hobart in 1855 the main link to Hobart in 1914 was, as it had been for many years, by water. As in other rural areas of the time such government services as health and education were rudimentary. Those seriously ill or in need of a reasonably good standard of education were forced to find their way to Hobart.

From the middle of the nineteenth century the Huon's economy had primarily depended upon its orchards and plentiful timber resources. Consequently the region's economic base was extremely fragile. This fragility was exacerbated by the fact that most of the area's produce was exported to either mainland or overseas markets so international events impacted heavily upon the Huon.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century attempts had been made to diversify the Huon's limited economic base. Attempts had been made to mine gold at Cygnet and a coal mine had been established at Catamaran. Neither had proved a success. There was the widespread belief that the rivers and hills to the west of the area held as yet vast untapped resources.

Before the war many in the Huon believed that given the right economic developments the region might come to rival the capital city of Hobart itself. There were some who believed Hobart's economic position was primarily due to the support it received from the Huon. J. D. Balfe, an early booster and Franklin member of the House of Assembly, claimed that but for the Huon "grass would be growing in the streets of Hobart".¹

This widely held feeling that Hobart was dependent for its success upon the Huon led some to believe that the area was being retarded by certain, unspecified but malicious interests, based in Hobart. At times this feeling was to verge on paranoia. For the Huon to expand its economic base the government would have to provide what the Huon

¹ *Daily Post*, October 16 1912.

believed to be the four pillars of development: a railway link to Hobart, the development of a deepwater port at Geeveston, the dredging of the Huon River to Franklin and the reclamation of its swampy foreshore. Despite the war the Huon was to agitate long and hard for all four developments.

The construction of a railway had been first proposed in 1885 when a petition containing over one thousand names was presented to Parliament by J. Watchorn, Franklin member of the Legislative Council. The government ordered a select committee to investigate the proposal. The committee met in 1886, gathered evidence and initiated a somewhat cursory survey of a possible route but decided that no recommendations could be made until further investigations had taken place.^{1A} There the matter was allowed to rest. Continued agitation led to the establishment of another committee in 1910.^{1B} It too recommended greater study before the government should commit the large amount of money needed to fund such development. The main difficulty was that neither committee was convinced a rail link would return a profit that compensated the cost of development.

Of course the proponents of the rail link were more than convinced the line would pay its way. They argued that the railway would open up a new timber resource, on its own sufficient to justify the expense. The potential exploitation of large scale mineral deposits would prove an added bonus. Orchardists saw the link as a means by which they could reduce the harmful handling and added charges their fruit received on its way to Hobart by sea. Evidence was also presented that the rail link would carry some 13 000 to 14 000 thousand tourists a year to the area. How, argued the railway's proponents, could the government lose, given the enormous benefits to be realised all round.

In 1912 yet another deputation met with the Premier, A. E. Solomon, the Minister for Lands and Works, E. Mulcahy, and the Chief Secretary G. H. Butler. The recent development of the State's Hydro Electric scheme offered a new and potentially exciting alternative. All previous submissions had in mind the use of a steam train but now there was the possibility of a cheaper and more efficient electric system. Unlike the steam train, the electric train would be able to stop and start over short distances so every orchard would have its own railway siding. The transport of fruit would be immeasurably more efficient.

The deputation again stressed the Huon's right to such development. The Hon. G. P. Fitzgerald claimed that "it was to the Huon district alone that Tasmania owed its present position, and its being, outside political matters, in a prosperous condition. There was no capital city which had a population near it as large as there was in the Huon which was without a railway communication thereto."² Solomon informed the deputation his government was keeping an open mind in the matter but warned the state's present financial problems imposed severe restrictions on all development. He reminded the deputation that all previous investigations of a rail link had been unable to guarantee its economic viability.

The Huon's demand for a deepwater port at Geeveston had continually perplexed successive governments. In their view the demand for both a rail and sea link seemed contradictory. There was no such contradiction in the minds of the Huon's boosters. The orchardists believed such developments offered freedom from the clutches of the Hobart shippers and the promise of higher returns on their fruit. A rail link saved on handling; the port offered direct access to overseas markets. Moreover the primary impetus for the port had not come from the orchardists but from the timber industry. It was widely believed that this industry had never achieved its full potential due to a lack of adequate ports. In 1914 timber shipments at Dover and Southport were still loaded by lighters which ferried cargo to boats anchored in the bay.

Despite repeated meetings with Government delegations a wharf at Geeveston seemed no closer in 1914 than at any other time. As with the railway the expected cost proved the main difficulty. Perhaps of equal significance was the widely held belief that the government's decision had been influenced by powerful Hobart interest groups. Hobart shipping firms and the Marine Board came in for a great deal of criticism in this context.

Since the beginning of settlement Franklin had always been regarded as the area's "capital." With steep hills at its back and a swampy foreshore it had proved a poor site for that role. These physical impediments placed severe limitations on expansion. What growth there had been was strung out along the banks of the Huon River but its frequent flooding and silting, and the shifting sandbanks this

² *ibid.*

produced, made access to the town by boat hazardous and difficult. Dredging the river to Franklin meant a safer passage for boats and a reclaimed foreshore offered valuable land for expansion. In early 1914 the government reluctantly gave approval for the work to begin. It was soon obvious that the dredge used to carry out the work was inadequate to the task. For this reason work on the project ceased. Before a new dredge could be deployed to the site, war had begun.



Franklin Township: First "Capital" of the Huon.

Tourism was the last of the Huon's hopes for development. From the late nineteenth century the area's good beaches, pleasant climate and scenic attractions had proved popular to both Tasmanian and mainland visitors. The small fishing village of Dover and the forests of the Arve Valley held particular promise. There was no doubt in the minds of most that if a regular rail link and a suitable port were developed this fledgling industry would provide a substantial economic boost to the region. In early 1914 the Huon believed itself to be on the threshold of what would prove to be a confident and prosperous future. It at last seemed possible that the area's economic overdependence on the ever vulnerable export of apples and timber might be overcome, replaced with a more diversified economic base. Indeed, local boosters argued that a little government assistance would see the Huon's emergence as

an economic power house for the state. But the advent of war in Europe would sorely test such hopes and crystalise those very fears which had long motivated the boosters' dreams.

Such fears were readily reflected in the *Huon Times*'s early reportage of the war. No concentration here on patriotic fervour, so favoured by most Tasmanian papers. Instead there was a clinical reportage of the economic consequences of the war. The *Huon Times* reported the Australian Stock Exchange to be one of the first casualties of the war, noting that "mining stocks alone have receded in value over one million pounds."³ A week later the paper nervously reported that large trade the Huon had so long enjoyed with Germany to be at an end. There would be few in the Huon unaware of the threat this posed to the area's viability. So totally reliant on the export of timber and apples for its income the Huon was probably more vulnerable than any other community in Tasmania.

The danger that the war posed became apparent in discussions within local councils. On August 6 the Cygnet Council passed a resolution supporting the Imperial Government and pledging loyalty to Empire. In so doing the Council expressed the belief that "by growing all the foodstuffs they can (they) will be assisting the Empire as much as by placing men in the field."⁴ Two days later the Huon Council moved a similar vote of loyalty. The *Huon Times* noted that some councillors expressed a concern that the war had its origins in trade rather than high moral issues. Tempered enthusiasm or not, the Huon soon found itself directly involved in the war.

On the evening of August 5 the calm of the area was disturbed by the appearance of a naval force under the command of Lieutenant Russel Young. The presence of such a military force immediately inspired a succession of rumours. Some believed the Germans to have attempted a landing at the mouth of the Huon River; others felt the naval force had been sent to defend the small town of Catamaran. It soon transpired that the sailors had been ordered to the Huon to effect the arrest of a hapless German steamer, the *Oberhaussen*, then loading timber at Port Huon.^{4A} The naval party reached the *Oberhaussen* at 7.30

³ *Huon Times*, August 1 1914.

⁴ *ibid.*, August 8 1914.

and promptly commandeered the ship. The following day she sailed for Hobart where the crew were interned at Claremont Camp until their removal to the quarantine station at Bruny Island.

Within 48 hours of the Oberhausen's capture the first men to enlist from the Huon boarded the steamer Endeavour and made the short journey to the newly established army camp at the Sandy Bay golf course. A noisy crowd of three to four hundred gathered at Cygnet to farewell these men, the first of many to leave the Huon.

Like the rest of Tasmania the Huon rushed to organise funds in aid of the war effort. A concert was held at the Franklin Town Hall to raise money for the Hobart Patriotic Fund. At Castle Forbes Bay a series of euchre nights were held. There was general dismay when on the first night it was discovered that the shaving kit offered as first prize had been made in Germany. The Franklin branch of the Druids passed a resolution conferring full membership on any of its members who travelled overseas with the Australian Imperial Force.

By the middle of August the *Huon Times* reported what all had feared since the outbreak of war some two weeks earlier: the rumour that the Esperance mills would have to close due to the sudden downturn in trade. By the beginning of September there was further cause for alarm when newspaper reports commented on the possible collapse of the orcharding industry. On September 5 the *Huon Times* remarked on the difficult times that lay ahead for the area. The article pointed out that unlike other parts of Tasmania, such as the mining communities of the west coast, orchardists could not simply leave their holdings. Mines could close down and wait for the end of the war to reopen but orchards required constant care and attention. If left for even a relatively short period of time they would quickly deteriorate. Worse still, as most orchardists depended on the export earnings from one year to finance the following year's crop, to lose the export market for that year alone might mean the complete loss of the orchards.

In early October 1914 the timber mills at Stanmore, Catamaran and Raminea burned down. By the end of October the Hopetown and Cockle Creek mills had been forced to close. A great proportion of the Cockle Creek railway track had been destroyed by fire. Due to the downturn in trade the Raminea mill was soon forced to shed some 50% of its workers. Such downturn was impressive. The number of men employed in the timber industry dropped from 1 846 in 1912 to 1 384 in 1915.^{4B} Sawn

timber production fell from 63 242 859 feet to 47 889 991 over the corresponding period.⁵ There were urgent calls for the government to do something to ease the burden of growing unemployment in the area. The *Huon Times* described the situation as one of special need and suggested the government's apparent reluctance to help was yet another example of that neglect with which the Huon had for so long been treated.

The closures proved a double blow. Many of the men who worked in the mills were also attempting to establish their own farms and orchards. The income derived from such jobs allowed them to develop their properties. If the government was either unable or unwilling to offer some kind of relief then they would be forced to leave their properties. As the *Huon Times* noted "the case of many of these men is particularly hard, inasmuch as while working at the mills they have been endeavouring to build up homes for themselves on small blocks they have selected, just as many of the stalwart pioneers of the district did before them."⁶ By early November two hundred men were out of work at Dover. As they had been earning some 1,600 ⁷a month the *Huon Times* warned that the loss of this income would soon see "a depression in all areas of local trade."⁸ There were those, however, who believed the growing unemployment in Esperance to be the result of union interference rather than war time trade restrictions. In their view the war had merely been a precipitating factor. W. L. Clennett, owner of the Stanmore mill, claimed the present crisis had resulted from the "increasing burdens being placed upon sawmillers by the industrial organisations."⁹ In the years immediately preceding the war attempts had been made to unionise timber workers around Geeveston and Dover. The Timber Workers union had been especially active in the area though it found the going difficult. Two early organisers had been W. A. Woods and David Dicker, both of whom were to become Labor Members of State parliament. In 1908 Woods managed to establish a small branch of the Timber Workers Union in Esperance. On his return

⁵ *T. J. P. P.* Volume LXXVII 1917 p289.

⁶ *Huon Times*, October 31 1914.

⁷ *Ibid.*, November 4 1914.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ W. A. Woods to J. Sutch May 8 1908 NS 139/8/3.

to Hobart he wrote to J. Sutch of the Trades Hall in Melbourne, informing him that he had "just returned from a trip towards the South Pole where the sawmills are busy slicing blue gum logs and mill hands in a casual and indiscriminate way."¹⁰ Woods made special note of the shyness he had found among those workers and found them to be wary of unions, believing such to be synonymous with the idea of "agitation". At Hastings, Woods was pleased he had been able to persuade twenty men to form a local branch. He also managed to enlist one "Tiger" Beresford to act as branch secretary. In his letter Woods passed the revealing comment that:

Berseford showed some pluck in taking on the job - for the bosses are hostile and offending the bosses in those parts is akin to the offending of God - in the eyes of the local men. That's the tradition and though the mills hands have nothing to lose but their servitude and a few (very few) remaining fingers and toes, the tradition is all powerful.¹¹

Many of these mill towns had long been communities unto themselves and at the head of each stood the mill owner or manager - often a deeply religious Scot. The near patriarchal quality of many of these men entered local folklore. An early manager of the Strathblane mill had been particularly notorious. On one occasion he ordered his employees to pay for the construction of a local school, forcing them to enrol their children on pain of dismissal. Following a disagreement with the teacher he then threatened to sack any worker who allowed his child to attend the school. This same manager also banned dogs from the mill site and declared Sundays to be sacred. To own a dog or to hang out washing on the Sabbath brought instant dismissal.^{11A}

The omniscient owner and the dangerous work were but two of the notable features of mill life. There was another, more insidious factor, which left the worker locked into a semi-feudal state. This was the truck system of wages. The worker was often paid in kind. What cash wages he did receive had usually, due to poor roads and the long hours of work, to be spent at the mill store. Mills generally provided workers with accommodation, though usually of a wretched kind. Houses were often poorly built and overcrowded, with little or no sanitation. Consequently

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *Huon Times*, March 17 1915

the worker's health often suffered and with professional help some distance away the mill owner regularly doubled as doctor or dentist. Diseases such as typhoid or scarlet fever were common.

By early 1915 most of the mills in the Huon had closed. Mainland markets contracted significantly after shipping was reallocated to war time needs. Traditional European markets, especially that of Germany, closed to imported timber from Tasmania. A series of bushfires destroyed a number of mills and the downturn in trade slowed their rebuilding. By 1915 too most of the easily accessible stands of forest had been cut out and timber getters were now increasingly forced to travel longer distances to gain good timber. In this bleaker, war time economy, the expense of constructing tram lines and the cost of transportation precluded new development.^{11B}

In late March 1915 the Huon's economy suffered a second blow when the Federal Government announced it was to commandeer the fruit boats. The decision, reflecting the successful German submarine attacks on allied shipping, met an outrage directed not so much at the decision itself but at the way it had been made. Although it was the height of the apple season there had been no consultation with local orchardists. Indeed, two of the ships affected by the decision, the *Clan Macarthur* and the *Euripides*, had both been loading fruit in Hobart at the very time they had been commandeered. The loss of these two boats alone meant one quarter of the fruit destined for the English market would fail to reach its destination. Fruitgrowers would be forced to dispose of their fruit on an already oversupplied mainland market.

Despite this setback, the news of German atrocities in Belgium produced revulsion similar to that felt nation wide. At Franklin money was raised for the relief of Belgium by way of weekly subscription. Esperance fundraisers collected £300 within a few weeks. The *Huon Times* referred to this quick response with pride. However, it noted that while people were happily prepared to raise money they were not so readily forthcoming when it came to enlistments and suggested that here the Huon "perhaps...needed stirring up".¹²

That "stirring up" came in July when Premier John Earle and the Leader of the Opposition, N. K. Ewing, visited the Huon to speak at a number of recruiting rallies. The *Huon Times* was fulsome in its praise

¹² M. Lake, *A Divided Society* (Melbourne, 1975) p 29.

of the bipartisan approach the two leaders had adopted. At Geeveston Earle and Ewing addressed four hundred people packed into the Town Hall. In his speech Earle warned that if Germany won the war then the present wage of eight shillings a week would drop to a mere four shillings. He urged all unmarried women not to become engaged to any man who showed himself unwilling to take his place at the front. Earle delivered the same message at Franklin, with the same disappointing result. The Geeveston rally only managed to attract twelve volunteers: seven of whom were rejected as being unfit for active service. The Franklin rally attracted fourteen volunteers: eight were rejected. Warden Ryan assured Earle such a poor showing was not the consequence of any disloyalty in the Huon, but rather reflected the haste with which men had been asked to make up their minds. Ryan promised there would be a noticeable improvement over the coming months. Others were less sanguine. The *Tasmanian Mail* was particularly severe in its indictment of the reluctant heroes of the Huon and warned menacingly that they were qualifying "for the white feather."¹³ This poor response no doubt alerted Earle to the potential difficulty of raising a volunteer army. Such experiences would eventually lead to his advocacy of conscription.

The most striking aspect of these Huon recruiting figures is the high rate of rejection. Thirty-eight of the 91 men who volunteered from the area in July 1915 were rejected.^{13A} It was a sad commentary on the general health of the Huon at that time and especially reflected the poor state of dental care and the danger of mill work. Wood's letter confirmed a missing finger or toe to be the common signature of mill work. By mid-August a hundred "reluctant heroes" had enlisted from the Huon: forty of these were from Southport. The numbers though still proved disappointing and brought the loyalty of many into question. An angry Councillor Clennett told a meeting of the Esperance Council he had heard one young man state publicly he would rather be a live coward than a dead hero.¹⁴

On the fourth of August the Huon took time off to celebrate the end of the first year of the war. Throughout the region businesses closed for an hour between eleven and twelve o'clock. Church services were well

¹³ *Huon Times*, August 18 1915.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, August 7 1915.

attended as congregations were reminded of their ties to Empire, of the debt Australia owed to England and of the history-making efforts of the Australian forces at Gallipoli. The Anglican Minister, the Reverend Menzies, proudly told his congregation that "Australia was the youngest nation, but the heroism displayed by her soldiers at Gallipoli (had) made her rise to the height of the oldest nation."¹⁵ There were soon moves to make April 25 the Australia Day holiday: in 1915 it had been held on July 30.

The first year of the war had not been auspicious for the Huon. The timber and orcharding industries were both under threat. Unemployment was rising. The economic cost of the war meant long yearned developments must needs be put on hold. The seeming slowness of enlistments had placed a question mark over the area's loyalty. There was though some sense of optimism. Following a successful Queen Carnival held to raise funds for the war effort the *Huon Times* was pleased to note that it afforded "further evidence that the disunity that has existed in the district in past years, is slowly but surely disappearing."¹⁶ Such comment seemed small compensation.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, September 15 1915.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

Chapter Two.

Towards a Soldier Settlement Scheme.

In 1913 the Tasmanian Government of Liberal Premier A.E.Solomon passed a Closer Settlement Act designed to encourage settlers to take up land in the State's undeveloped or underdeveloped areas. Such legislation was not unique to Tasmania. Most Australian states had already passed similar legislation. These acts were indicative of the widespread concern then existing throughout Australia at the nation's falling birth rate and the increasing urbanisation of its population. It was feared that these two factors were sapping the lifeblood of the nation and that something had to be done to reverse this trend. Such fears were encapsulated in what came to be known as the "agrarian myth" the idea "that Australia's vast land resources could be utilised by small farmers who would produce a surplus for export to the United Kingdom and would also provide a market for British manufactured goods."¹

The aim of Tasmania's Closer Settlement Act was to open up the state's virgin lands to rural settlement, to foster as yet untapped sources of agricultural wealth, cement links with Empire and develop a strong and healthy rural class. Such legislation clearly intended the development of a new or revitalised Australian character based on the "romantic or arcadian idea that farming represented an idealistic way of life because it was "close to nature" and was therefore in some way morally superior to urban life."² The settlement of Australia's as yet underutilised lands promised an added advantage. The anticipated increase in population would help offset the threat from those densely populated lands to the north. The agrarian myth reflected Australia's greater preoccupation with a white Australia.

In the Huon the Closer Settlement Act was seen to be an appropriate response to the region's demands upon successive governments. It offered hope of a more secure future to the state's outlying districts. No longer would their needs be sacrificed to the demands of the larger cities such as Hobart. The Act neatly complemented Huon mythology. Many

¹ K. Fry, "Soldier Settlement and the Agrarian Myth after the First World War," *Labour History* 48 (1985).
p.29

² *ibid.*, p.41.

in the Huon still saw themselves to be firmly in the tradition of those early settlers who had carved out homes for themselves from a hostile and unforgiving wilderness. The names of those early settlers: men such as Geeves, Walton and Parsons, were spoken of in hallowed terms. The myth promised success to anyone who worked hard, was frugal and diligent.

A *Huon Times* editorial of 1915 claimed the area to be exactly of a type the Government had in mind when it passed the Closer Settlement Act:

In no part of the Commonwealth can a more striking example of successful closer settlement be found than in the Huon. It is essentially a district of small holdings, many of which are of a surprisingly limited area. Moreover, it is a prosperous community, the best index to the individual prosperity of the settlers here being the fact that nowhere else can a district of the same extent be found wherein so many of the producers own the properties upon which they reside. All this can mean only one thing and that is that the district, by reason of its remarkable productiveness, is especially adapted for closer settlement.³

However the writer felt that in certain aspects the legislation proved faulty and suggested an immediate review by Parliament. The main concern centred on the Government's decision to create small farms from those large estates it intended purchasing in the north and the midlands. The *Huon Times* argued that this policy would fail to provide the State with any long term benefits. Rather than dismember these large estates the paper urged the development of small holdings in appropriate areas - areas such as the Huon. The closer settlement of such areas would add substantially to the state's economic base and develop a thriving and vibrant rural population.

The Earle government would have been only too happy to use the Closer Settlement Act to break up these large estates.^{3A} It had long been Labor policy to curb the legislative power of these large landowners and release the tight grip they held over the State's productive lands. Such power and wealth had long been resented in Labor circles. Despite the political ramifications of the Closer Settlement Act there were some, influenced by the events in Europe, who saw the Act in a more altruistic

³ *Huon Times*, July 21 1915

light. S. J. Kellaway suggested some of the closer settlement land in the Huon might be used to resettle refugees from Belgium.⁴ A few days later the *Huon Times* noted the Victorian Government's decision to give preference to returning soldiers when allocating land under its closer settlement scheme.⁵ Implicit was the suggestion that Tasmania adopt a similar approach.

The Federal Government had also begun to show interest in the issue of returning soldiers. On June 10 1915 Alexander Poynton, in the House of Representatives, asked Prime Minister Fisher what consideration had been given to the repatriation of returned soldiers. Poynton suggested Fisher "approach the various Premiers...with a view to an arrangement under which returned soldiers should have preference in connexion with land allotments dealt with by land boards."⁶ Following Poynton's suggestion Fisher wrote to Earle on 17 June requesting information on the availability of land suitable for the settlement of returned soldiers.⁷ In late July Earle informed Fisher that there would be little difficulty in finding such land providing the men were experienced in farming. "I have no doubt," wrote Earle, "that the government can find suitable land in this state, either crown lands or a specially selected large estate and I am prepared to make the effort when the time arises."⁸ It is clear from Earle's reply that he did not envision a scheme of any magnitude.

In early August the Federal Government announced its intention to establish a Federal Parliamentary War Committee which would "liaise between relevant departments, hospitals, Labor exchanges and employers in order to secure work for all men returning capable of it."⁹ By August 12 the committee had completed its report and presented it to Parliament. It outlined the first plans for the repatriation of returning

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, July 24 1915.

⁶ Premiers Department (PD) 1/302/212/1/16, 17 June 1915.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*, 30 July 1915.

⁹ M. Lake, *The Limits of Hope*. (Melbourne, 1987), p.27.

soldiers.¹⁰ The committee was quick to warn that:

The duty of the nation in respect to the employment and future welfare of Australian soldiers now fighting our battles is a matter which demands immediate and earnest consideration, with a view to bringing into being a properly organised body, representative of all classes of the community, which may be prepared in good time for the immense task we will be confronted with soon of finding civil employment for returned soldiers.¹¹

The committee suggested there was a need to co-ordinate those organisations which had previously been formed to raise money to assist returning soldiers and their families: otherwise confusion, inefficiency and a needless overlapping of services would occur.¹²

The committee also impressed upon the government the need to reassure those men who enlisted from either the Federal or State public service or from private enterprise that upon their return their jobs would still be open. It stressed that a number of these men would return in an incapacitated state, unable to continue their previous occupations. For these men the government would have to look to alternative avenues of employment. The committee considered the provision of artificial limbs and a re-education programme as being two ways by which the Federal government might help. The committee urged the Government to establish State War Councils, the membership of which should comprise two Federal members appointed by a central committee, members of the State Parliament appointed by each State Government and representatives of municipal, commercial and industrial interests. Their responsibilities should be to: (1) find out certain facts about soldiers, (2) obtain particulars respecting employers and Labor, (3) classify the men under their respective advocations, (4) ascertain Crown and other lands available for farming and settlement purposes, (5) prepare particulars of public and municipal works available for employment, (6) establish a soldiers employment bureau and (7) arrange for securing employment for returned men whose injuries prevented them from following their

¹⁰ Returned Soldiers: Recommendations of the Federal Parliamentary Working Committee., C. P. P., Vol V, Sessions 1914-15-16-17., Paper 243.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

previous occupations. As Lake suggests ¹³, at this point the idea of settling returned men upon the land was merely one of a number of options.

13A

The Tasmanian War Council was established in September 1915. The Council included the Premier, J. Earle; the President of the Legislative Council, T. Gant; the Speaker of the House of Assembly, W. A. Woods; the leader of the Opposition, W. H. Lee; the Mayors of Hobart and Launceston, respectively W. M. Williams and P. Hart; the acting Chief Health Officer A. H. Clarke; the health Officers for Hobart and Launceston namely G. Sprott and G. H. Hogg; the President of the Chamber of Commerce A. H. Ashbolt, the President of the Trades and Labor Council W. Lawrence and the Commissioner of Crown Lands E. A. Counsel. Senators Long and McWilliam were the Federal Government representatives and Colonel W. J. Clarke and Lieutenant R. P. Smith represented the military. When President of the Trades and Labor Council, W. Lawrence, wrote his letter of acceptance he did so on paper that bore the old Labor call "Workers of the world unite."

Although the State War Council followed the guidelines as established in the Federal Committee's agenda it is clear from the very beginning its primary concern lay with the provision of farms for the returned men. As one of its first initiatives the Council instructed the Lands and Surveys Department to prepare a report upon those lands suitable for soldier settlement throughout the state.

The impetus for such a move resulted from the growing pressure placed upon both the Government and the State War Council to alleviate the alleged mistreatment of returned men. In early October a deputation of Liberal League members, perhaps with electoral advantage in mind, approached the Premier, concerned that little was being done. The deputation, composed of W. J. Fullerton, Dr. W. E. Bottrill and J. C. McPhee being given the men, of the limited employment opportunities available to them and of the seeming indifference on the part of the civilian and military authorities. Fullerton told the Premier that "it was well to realise that from this time onward a number of soldiers would be returning constantly, and they should not be allowed to walk about the streets looking for work."¹⁴

¹³ Lake, *The Limits of Hope*, p.28.

¹⁴ *Mercury*, October 12 1915.

McPhee, in what would become an oft-repeated message, reminded the Premier that "At the time of the South African war the men were made a great fuss of when leaving Hobart, and were under the limelight for a few days after they returned, but after that no one bothered about them at all."¹⁵

Earle thanked the deputation for its concern and gave the assurance that both the Federal and State governments were addressing the problem. Earle claimed that at present the major concern of the State War Council lay in making adequate provision for the return of those men who had been seriously injured. "Many of the men would come back to Tasmania with enhanced reputations but without limbs, and it was only right that everything possible should be done for them."¹⁶ Earle informed the deputation that artificial limbs would be supplied as necessary, that rest homes would be established, that soldiers would be helped by the provision of free rail passes, and that some form of re-education facility would be established to help those soldiers who were incapable of returning to their old occupations.

During October a *Mercury* editorial outlined the problems it expected soldiers would face on their return. To alleviate these problems the *Mercury* suggested the soldiers be encouraged to take up land for settlement. It argued that as many of the soldiers had been:

bushmen or farmworkers...it would be most fitting that each of these men should have the opportunity of securing for himself a piece of land sufficient to earn a good living and make a future competency. In addition, there are a great many men who have hitherto been clerks, or shop assistants, or followed some avocation which kept them in cities, and confined them during the best part of the days within doors. These men will have learned to appreciate life in the open, even though accompanied by dangers and hardships, and will, perhaps not willingly return to their ledgers or counters.¹⁷

The *Mercury* believed that land most suited to resettlement lay in the midlands from a little north of Antill Ponds through to the Macquarie River. The paper argued that the best site would have to provide the

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*, October 19

returned man with an easy living in the first year, allow for large numbers to live in close proximity to each other and be readily accessible to a large centre of population. This last requirement recognised that many of the men, now more worldly wise, might not wish to be cut off from those minor pleasures to which they had become accustomed. It also acknowledged that many would return restless and unable to adjust to peace time conditions. In a sense the farms offered the soldiers a rudimentary form of therapy - a chance to reintegrate themselves into the wider community.

But the *Mercury* also believed resettling soldiers on the land offered the State a golden opportunity for progress and, as an added bonus, argued that such a scheme would prove attractive to potential immigrants. Land settlement offered a solution to two problems: the plight of the returned men and the more efficient utilisation of the State's as yet undeveloped agricultural lands. As the *Mercury* suggested "here is an exceptional chance to settle on the land fine men who are already proved good citizens, and who would readily take the chance if it were offered them."¹⁸ The *Mercury's* plans for resettlement received a warm reception. "A.A.G.", mother of an eighteen year old soldier, wrote in enthusiastic support suggesting "the Government might give Crown Land for the purpose,(or) landholders might contribute blocks of an acre or more. The men of the different districts might give work - say a day a week - either singly or in working bees, to clear, fence, plough and plant the blocks."¹⁹

In early November the State War Council wrote to every Local Council in the State requesting help in the repatriation of soldiers.^{19A} The letter suggested each council form a National Service Committee to liase with the central War Council in Hobart. There was to be no restriction on the size of these committees but their executive had to include the Warden, the Police Magistrate or other government official, a practical farmer or pastoralist, a good businessman, a recognised Labor man and two ladies. The central responsibility of these committees was to provide advice on both employment prospects for wounded returnees and the amount of land available, either as vacant Crown Lands or large estates, suitable for soldier settlement within the municipality. In judging the suitability

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*, October 21 1915.

of land the Committee was to keep in mind the quantity, quality, value, distance from transport to markets and the type of settler it would most readily support.

The establishment of these National Service Committees served to reinforce the belief that the main focus of repatriation in Tasmania would be the settlement of soldiers on small farms. Whether the *Mercury* had been acting in a wholly independent capacity must be open to doubt. Perhaps it was acting in a semi-official capacity, preparing the community for such an idea so as to frustrate any potential opposition. It is certain the War Council's plans would meet with a great deal of scepticism.

In early November the Cygnet and Huonville Councils discussed the State War Council's request for assistance. At Cygnet there was initial discontent at the request to appoint a Labor man to the Executive of the local National Service Committee. The Warden managed to quell such discontent by reminding Council that politics had no role to play in such an important matter and warned that if repatriation was to be successful it must be above party political considerations. Political differences settled the Council quickly moved to reject the idea of using vacant Crown Lands for resettlement. Councillor Markham expressed great concern at such a proposal and claimed it would be more suitable to settle men on land that had already been cleared. However, as there were no large estates in the area it was felt that the purchase of small farms or orchards would present an ideal solution. Compact and already productive such properties would not prove too taxing on either the physical or professional acumen of the soldier. Councillor Atkins agreed with Markham and declared the idea of settling returned men on small farms near Cygnet to be a good one, especially if the men went in for small fruits. Whereas the Cygnet Council had extended its brief in suggesting the State War Council consider small farms for resettlement, the Huon Council merely replied that "there were no large estates in the municipality at all. All the holdings were small and the Crown Lands were too far from easy transit."²⁰ A motion to this effect was agreed unanimously. Such reply carried no imputation of disinterest but rather reflected the greater conservatism of the Council. The Huon municipality had a wider economic base than that at Cygnet - was less

²⁰ *Huon Times*, November 13 1915.

dependent upon orcharding. Some in the Cygnet Council no doubt regarded the government's repatriation plans as a means by which the economic base of the area might be extended and consolidated. There was no such imperative at Huonville or Franklin.

While the War Council moved to establish its state wide register of land suitable for resettlement there were continuing complaints about its supposed inactivity. In November J. T. H. Whitsitt^{20A}, Independent member for Darwin, moved an adjournment of debate in the House of Assembly so the matter might be discussed. Whitsitt warned that many of the returned men were being treated very shabbily indeed. Some had told him that "when they came back to Tasmania it looked as though they were not wanted, or were regarded as castaways."²¹ Whitsitt claimed returned men had experienced difficulty in obtaining transport passes and had been refused new clothing from Government stores; he cited the case of one man who, having apparently lost his pay book during a bayonet charge at Gallipoli, had returned to Launceston an invalid and was now stoney broke. Whitsitt told the House that "such was the treatment of our returned heroes, who had set an example to the fighting men of the world. To think of such treatment made his blood boil."²² Other members of the House claimed they too had returned constituents who were experiencing similar problems. W. J. Fullerton said that when he had approached Earle about a similar issue earlier in the year he had nearly had his head bitten off. The Boer spectre haunted discussion. When the Premier rose to defend the Government David Dicker, a Labor member for Franklin, interjected "the South African war again."²³ Although it is difficult to gauge to what extent the debate over resettlement reflected the experiences of returnees from the earlier War there is little doubt those memories influenced the views of many.

In reply Earle admitted some difficulties had been experienced in the course of repatriation but claimed that war-time disruption of the nation's economy had made life difficult for many. Earle reminded Parliament that strictly speaking the government held no responsibility for repatriation - that responsibility lay with the State War Council. Such a refined point satisfied few. As Earle was both President of the

²¹ *Mercury*, November 17 1915.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

State War Council and Premier the distinction was for many a nonsense. Adopting the role of State War Council President, Earle reminded Parliament that as the Council had only recently commenced operations it would be unrealistic to expect immediate solutions. Certain approaches had already been made to Local Councils and future interstate meetings of State War Councils would no doubt formulate and develop legislation to assist the returned men.

Towards the end of 1915 the issue of returned soldiers had quickly become politicised. Attempts to place these men above party politics had necessarily to fail. Some politicians no doubt saw the championing of the returned soldier's cause as a means to parliamentary office. Indeed, it would have been impossible for any politician to have ignored such a volatile issue. The returned men themselves were quick to realise and exploit their unique position. As Lake noted "the returned soldiers represented a new and powerful figure in Australian society. He assumed the roles of instructor, mentor and policeman all in one: he was the superior repository of patriotic values."²⁴ In March 1916 this role would be formalised in the establishment of the Returned Soldiers Association. Although the Government appeared to have satisfactorily answered its detractors, Earle felt sufficiently concerned to warn the Federal Minister for Defence:

If the statement (sic) are only partly true, the wrong must at once be righted, or not only will Australia be disgraced but recruiting will be seriously affected. How can I, or anyone else, ask young men to enlist for the front, if in the event of them returning wounded, they may be cast aside like a broken stool. I trust the military authorities are not depending upon any patriotic society to care for the soldiers. These societies who have collected funds should, and I believe are assisting families of soldiers, and perhaps finding some comforts, but the real and full care of the soldiers is the duty of the State. No one else should be depended upon, or expected to perform that duty.²⁵

Earle recognised that continued public discussion of such allegations jeopardised recruiting and effectively transferred responsibility for repatriation from the federal to the state government - a situation

²⁴ Lake, *A Divided Society*., p.69.

²⁵ PD1/302/212/4/15, 17 November 1915.

fraught with political danger.

Earle's letter received an immediate response. The public questioning of repatriation had clearly created consternation in Melbourne. J. J. Long, Tasmanian Senator representing the Minister for Defence, was dispatched to Hobart to hold an inquiry into Whitsitt's claims. During its course several witnesses refuted Whitsitt's allegations, leading Long to remark that he could "come to no other conclusion than that the charges made by him (Whitsitt) of ill treatment of wounded soldiers by the Defence authorities are absolutely without foundation. In nearly every instance they were found to be frivolous in the extreme."²⁶

Though Whitsitt had been discredited there is little doubt that on occasion returned men had been wronged - but whether this was due to maladministration or to the soldier's basic ignorance of his rights is not clear. For whatever reason, as Earle acknowledged in his letter to the Minister of Defence, the treatment of returned men was an especially sensitive matter. The Whitsitt allegations highlighted the need for the authorities to develop an adequate repatriation scheme: less perhaps as a "reward" for military service than as an incentive to recruitment. This suggests many Tasmanians were far from convinced of the need to involve Australian troops in what was essentially a European conflict. Such reluctance had been clearly evident during Earle's recent recruiting drive in the Huon. In late 1915 the State War Council requested the Lands and Surveys Department to report upon those lands, both Crown and private, which might be used for the settlement of returned soldiers. The Department presented its report on 3 December. This report, written by E. A. Counsel and W. H. Lee, rejected the use of Crown Land on unspecified legal grounds. The report noted that as complex legislation would be needed to overcome these legal difficulties it would prove an easier course for Parliament to pass legislation allowing for the compulsory purchase of private property. Referring to the larger issue of soldier settlement, the report suggested that the most effective method of dealing with the returned men would be to make provision for their temporary location on farms as they arrive "so that only those may be selected for settlement, who, by reason of their previous experience and condition on arrival, will be likely to work out

²⁶ *ibid.*, 19 November 1915.

their salvation on the land."²⁷ It was suggested that a special farm be established or that the State Farm be used. Here the men would spend a period of time working on a probationary basis so that their skills and expertise might be judged before they were given properties of their own. As well as having a probationary function, these farms would also be used to train the men in agricultural methods relevant to their chosen area - whether it be general agriculture, horticulture, orcharding or dairying. The report stressed that the cost of such an exercise should not prove too great and suggested that the accommodation need not be elaborate, expensive or extensive "and when the scheme would be fairly in operation the proportion of those in occupation should be drafted out about as rapidly as those arriving from the front."²⁸ The report assumed that repatriation would be an ordered and systematic process extending over a reasonable period of time. Any rapid return of men would expose the fragility of the plan.

In early January 1916 Lee and Counsel submitted a further, more complete report, to the State War Council. This first summarised the purpose of the Closer Settlement Acts, presenting them as an attempt to allow that group of settlers, excluded from access to land by the Crown Lands Act but eminently suitable as settlers, to take up small farms on State owned land. The report stressed that though the energies and skills of the applicant would count for a great deal:

a man should possess at any rate from three hundred to four hundred pounds, or the equivalent in stock and implements, to make a fair start on the land, varying according to the size and conditions of the holding, and that he should be a married man, physically and mentally fitted for the occupation. Where a settler has not had sufficient means to fairly support his energies, it is a long and hard struggle, in which only those best suited to the conditions can succeed, while the remainder are doomed to certain failure.²⁹

The report warned that as a large number of soldiers would in fact possess little or no capital then a considerable capital outlay would be

²⁷ *ibid.*, December 3 1915.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ PD1/302/212/6/16, January 28 1916.

required to establish and support them on the land. In what would prove to be a prophetic warning Lee and Counsel noted that "the most expert skill and judgement and the exercise of the greatest care in the selection of applicants must commend itself to the Council, if a failure in the project and the consequent loss of a large amount of capital are to be averted."³⁰

The report suggested a system of classification to be used in the selection of settlers. There were three categories: (1) those men experienced and in good physical condition who it was believed would succeed, (2) those men debarred from group one due to war related injuries who would need an improved piece of land to be successful and (3) those men who through lack of experience or physical injury were unsuited to farming and could only be helped by the offer of temporary employment under day rates of pay.



A Settler's Homestead near Dover at the turn of the Century.

Once again the report recommended the use of the State Farm but significantly included a proposal to settle a number of returned men on Crown Land near Dover in the Huon. At the time of the report's publication this was apparently the only Crown Land available. The

³⁰ *ibid.*

land, some 3 000 acres in extent, had been resumed from timber leases and lay about 50 miles by road or 30 miles by sea from Hobart. The quality of the soil was declared to range from good to excellent and the land was well served by tramways. A steamer ran twice weekly to a good port at Dover. The report also included an offer from the Huon Timber Company to sell 639 acres to the Government. It was felt this land could be cleared at a cost of 30s an acre and that it would prove suitable for grazing, fattening stock, mixed-farming and orcharding. The offer also included a fifteen roomed residence and 28 other one-to seven-roomed "tenements". It was felt these would provide adequate temporary shelter for the settlers and offered a possible site for a training school. What seemed especially attractive about the Huon Timber Company's offer was the possibility that cleared timber might be sent to Hobart as firewood providing the settlers with an immediate source of income. The report was fulsome in its praise for the site:

This area, with its favourable surroundings, appears to offer a special opportunity for the temporary employment of those who might wish to try their hands at land settlement, as the men can be occupied, and, under efficient management, will during the probationary period become initiated into the best methods of road making, scrubbing, burning off, fencing and all kinds of work incidental to a settler's life. Moreover, in the process of clearing the land, firewood can be cut, sawn, split and shipped to Hobart at remunerative rates.³¹

By early 1916 an embryonic plan for settlement lay before the State War Council. Such a plan seemed to offer the best solution to what was rapidly becoming a difficult issue. Although Counsel and Lee's reports acknowledged that there were inherent dangers in any plan for resettlement they also offered hope of successful repatriation and a potential advancement of Tasmania's interests. Any danger signs might easily be overlooked amidst the heady patriotism of the time.

³¹ *ibid.*

Chapter Three.

The Huon Continues the War.

In early January 1916 the editor of the *Huon Times* referred to the depressing effect that the war was having upon the Tasmanian community, especially in the Huon. "In our district the change was particularly marked. The new year was born without ostentation, there being no organised celebrations of any kind. The community was found in a high mood of seriousness."¹ True, the local patriotic funds were still working successfully and the Shipwrights Point Regatta had been held as usual, but there was now a deepening concern about the future of the apple industry and a growing feeling that the Huon had somehow become politically disenfranchised, leaving small hope of any development for the area.

The state election of March 1916 did little to allay this increasingly cynical attitude. Both Labor and Liberal politicians campaigned strongly but, asked whether they supported developments such as the railway or the dredging of the Huon, replied that the state's financial difficulties precluded any immediate hope of such major projects.^{1A} Within the Huon it was seen to be yet another excuse justifying inactivity.

Yet the *Huon Times* saw some cause for optimism and argued that while the war had given pause to development it had also drawn the community closer together. The editor claimed that "the war has broken down many barriers that divided our social and political life. Men were drawn together for mutual protection against a foe that threatened their very existence, and in coming together they found so many things in common that they have lost the inclination to be divided by artificial means."² Such optimism was somewhat wide of the mark for if anything the war years displayed a hardening of class divisions.^{2A}

The election result saw the Earle Labor government lose office to the Liberals, led by W. H. Lee. Lee had first entered parliament in 1909. By 1915 he was party whip and leader of the opposition. As Premier he worked to establish new industries. He encouraged plans for hydro - electric power: Cadbury's factory and the Zinc works stand to his credit. The fact that "he was opposed during the war to giving sanction to

¹ *Huon Times*, January 1 1916.

² *ibid.*, March 21 1916.

unremunerative works"³ would create difficulty for the Huon's boosters. The Labor Party managed to attract 55% of the Huon vote but the pattern of that voting made clear the division then existing within the region. The vote went most strongly against Labor in the north. At Huonville the party polled a mere 23% ; at Franklin a more creditable 42%. In the south Labor polled strongly and the further south the stronger this support became. Both Hastings and Recherche gave over 90% of their vote to Labor. At Hastings the Liberal Party attracted a mere four percent of the vote. The personal following enjoyed by David Dicker and the strength of the unions clearly had determined the size of this vote in the south.

The election result did little to further the Huon's cause. There was a widespread belief that due to a lack of political strength and unity, the Huon failed to receive its share of Government expenditure. The Cygnet Council claimed the north of the state received more than its due and that this was the result of its weighted political representation: the north's eighteen parliamentarians, so it was believed, were able to dominate the fourteen southern members.^{3A} What was particularly upsetting was the generous support that had been given in the past to the Deloraine Railway line. Having long campaigned for a railway of its own the Huon perceived this line to symbolise the economic repression under which the area had long been forced to exist. The cause for such economic repression was held to lie in the State's unfair electoral system. By now many perceived all communities north of the Huon to be a threat; none moreso than Hobart, the state's capital. In the eyes of many the city was shameless. "The capital was largely kept going by the fruit and timber industries, yet Hobart commercial men had not given the Huon help in any shape or form to develop the district."⁴

This growing sense of political impotence led to calls for the boundaries of the then sprawling electorate of Franklin to be reformed. In 1916 that electorate stretched from Port Davey in the south to Campbelltown in the north with the Franklin parliamentarians coming from New Norfolk, Campbell Town, Sorell and Hobart. What, it was asked, did the people of the Huon have in common with the pastoral

³ L. Robson, *History of Tasmania: Colony and State from 1856-1980s*. (Melbourne 1991) p.389.

⁴ *Huon Times*, July 7 1916.

community of Campbell Town? It was felt that if the electorate could be reduced in size then there was the greater chance that the Huon would receive adequate representation of its special interests.

The party system was also seen to be a problem, although some saw a hope in the fact the parties were evenly represented in Parliament and there were suggestions that one of the Franklin members should threaten to bring the Government down if nothing was done towards helping fund local developments. If this proved an impossibility then it was best perhaps to abandon the idea of parties altogether and replace them with truly local representatives. As the *Huon Times* pointed out:

in all parts of the Huon lately there have been indications of a radical change in regard to political views, and the cause is not far to seek. Liberal and Labor Governments have come and gone in Tasmania: each has promised to work wonders for the development of the Huon: but no party has a singular monument to point to as even part fulfilment of its promise. It is not strange then that there should be a wide spread agitation for the abandonment of the party politics and a desire to send to parliament only men who will devote their energies to the proper development of the valuable resources of the district.⁵

The position had nearly become one of despair, the community felt threatened.

The position today is that although the Huon was one of the first districts in the state to attract rural settlement, has contributed more to the building up of Hobart than any other district in southern Tasmania, and is the most closely settled district in Australia, apart from roads and bridges which have been largely paid for by the residents themselves, it is devoid of any public works whatever except the bungled attempt at reclamation work at Franklin.⁶

Frustration reached breaking point in July when the Esperance Council passed a resolution of no confidence in one of the Huon's most popular and longest serving parliamentarians, J. W. Evans. The move was the direct result of Evans' decision to change his stance on the proposed site of a port at Geeveston. This vote of no confidence was no

⁵ *ibid.*, July 14 1916.

⁶ *ibid.*, July 11 1916.

capricious whim for Evans had by now come to symbolise all that was wrong with the party system. Evans had initially supported the deepwater site at Shipwrights Point but had recently changed his mind and now, in what was seen as an act of treachery, supported the shallow site at Port Huon. The difference between the two sites was viewed as crucial to the Huon's progress. The *Huon times* questioned Evans' decision. "It looks very like as though he has realised at last that he cannot serve two masters - his firm and the electors of the Huon - and has chosen to serve the former. There is no doubt that if a deepwater wharf is built at Shipwrights Point where overseas boats could load their fruit it would be a serious blow to Hobart shipping firms."⁷ Evans was, and had been for some time, the manager of the Hobart branch of the shipping company Huddart Parker Ltd.⁸ Fellow Franklin member Frederick Burbury sprang to Evan's defence accusing the Esperance Council of placing its own interests before that of the state and warned that if an overseas port were built at Port Huon the Huon might become merely a suburb of Melbourne or Sydney. "Elector" from Franklin was far from impressed and asked why "Mr Burbury evidently thinks it is a dreadful crime for the fruitgrowers of the Huon to desire to market their fruit at a more profitable rate by cutting out the unnecessary double handling and extra shipping charge at Hobart."⁹

Premier Lee's visit to the Huon in late July brought little comfort. He offered a choice of either a railway or a port but claimed there could be no possibility of the government supporting both. The decision was far from popular. S. J. Kellaway, in a letter to the *Huon Times*, spoke for many when he complained of what he felt to be the unfairness of the situation. After all, he suggested, hadn't local residents paid taxes on a railway for years and received little in return? There was an urgent need for a port because at present it took longer to ship fruit to Hobart than it did to Sydney. But now, claimed Kellaway, "when the people of the Huon ask for what is their due they are told that they cannot have it. After all the district (produces) a large proportion of the fruit which keeps the

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ F. C. Green, *A Century of Responsible Government 1856-1956*. (Hobart 1956) p213.

⁹ *Huon Times*, July 18 1916.

Hobart jam and other factories employing thousands of hands."¹⁰ Such arguments failed to persuade Lee from the government's view that the cost of the war precluded all major development. His stance only served to convince most that Lee was a mere apologist for the business interests of Hobart.^{10A}

Lee's decision strengthened the Huon's antagonism towards all things political. The government's plans for soldier settlement at Dover reinforced this belief.

As outlined in the previous chapter the government, acting on the advice of officers of the Lands and Surveys Department, had prepared plans for the settlement of soldiers on Crown Land immediately behind Dover. The Lands and Surveys report had spoken glowingly of this land, believing it to be eminently suited to soldier settlement. But such optimism was not shared by the local community. Their disquiet at such a proposal would soon turn to open hostility.

In January 1916 the *Huon Times*, already aware of the government's intention to settle soldiers in the Huon, had suggested that if the government were prepared to provide access, then the Denison Valley would prove to be a perfect site. The paper, while acknowledging the government's preference for large estates or the limited use of Crown Lands, complained that when the Lands and Surveys Department had sought advice from local councils on potential settlement sites, the brief had been too restrictive. The department's demand that the land be ready for cropping and close to good transport had denied any possibility of opening up new lands to settlement. Although admitting it may have misunderstood the government's intention the paper still strongly urged consideration of the Denison Valley and gave the assurance that the land in question was as fertile as any to be found in the Huon. As the paper argued "there is not a large estate in the whole district and the reason is primarily that every acre of the land in it is admirably suitable for intense cultivation."¹¹ The government soon rejected such advice and on the 8 February, made public the interest it had in the land near Dover. The announcement produced an immediate outcry.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, July 28 1916.

¹¹ *ibid.*, January 28 1916.

The Esperance Council, now the issue was public, vehemently attacked the government's proposal.^{11A} Councillor Clennett claimed the question of soldier settlement to be the most important issue that the state now had to face and argued that the government's proposal clearly demonstrated that it was failing to take the issue seriously. For Clennett, the Lands and Surveys' report broke faith with the soldiers who had been promised land at the end of the war.

Clennett claimed that when the Esperance Council had received a letter from the State War Council in January 1916 seeking its opinion on the Dover site the Council had unanimously agreed the land would prove too great a handicap for any soldier who was settled there. The Council had been scathing in its criticism. It claimed the houses referred to lay some four miles from the farm land and that the supposed thirteen miles of railway was in reality a mere eight miles, four of which had already been torn up. As if this were not bad enough the railway ended before the Dover jetty so that the settlers would have to lump their produce a fair distance to the boats. The cost of grassing the land was not the 30s as had been believed but was closer to 5, and the land itself was not suitable for growing vegetables of any kind. The chance of making a profit, or any money, from sending firewood to Hobart was laughable.

The Council was deeply concerned at the proposal to settle such a large number of inexperienced men in the same place, believing this would not help them to adapt to the land in any way. It would be better, so the Council suggested, to place the men out on small blocks in close proximity to experienced men who could help them settle on the land. It was suggested that such blocks were available near Lune River to the south of Dover. The *Huon Times* gave strong support to the Esperance Council arguing that "under the best of conditions it is by no means certain that even the majority of men taking up land will prove successful, but when totally inexperienced men are given worse than third class land it is simply courting danger."¹²

Most members of the Esperance Council were convinced the War Council had been far too hasty in its planning. They claimed it had considered repatriation to be only the resettlement of men on the land, and warned that many of the returned men might not wish to go on the

¹² *ibid.*, February 15 1916.

land. In fact, the Council argued, there might not be enough men to take up the number of jobs on offer at the end of the war when the present situation returned to normal. Small holdings might suit the wounded but the Council was convinced that able men would have no trouble finding employment. Whether this view reflected the self interest of the Council, composed largely as it was of mill owners, is not clear. No doubt many of them held the private fear that the government's plans to settle returned men might threaten their labour supply. Though these concerns may have played some role in the Council's stance, probably a greater motivation was the concern that the council had for the welfare of the soldiers.

In March the Esperance Council was criticised by both the State War Council and the *Mercury* over its opposition to the government's plans. The *Mercury* accused the Council of apathy and implied that its present attitude displayed a sense of disloyalty. In turn the *Huon Times* accused the *Mercury* of being no more than an "apologist" for the State War Council and other, unspecified, government interests.

The Esperance Council, never doubting its patriotic motives, rejected the *Mercury's* comments. Clennett claimed that though some self appointed "patriots" in Hobart might accuse the Council of apathy he was convinced that this was not the case. Someone, he argued, had to put a stop to the Government's absurd plans and protect the interests of the returned men. Clennett was sure that "they would do the returned soldiers a greater kindness by putting them in the Turkish trenches than place them where it was proposed and let them linger for years."¹³ Councillor Burgess was even more scathing when he suggested that "they might just as well put the men under the land as put them on any virgin soil - at any rate in the Esperance Municipality."¹⁴ When an unnamed member of the War Council reportedly claimed that it had already had an offer from an unidentified buyer of a pound an acre for the land near Dover, the Esperance Council was quick to suggest that the Government accept the offer before the person realised the mistake they were making.

On 17 March the *Huon Times* again asked why the War Council seemed so intent on the use of this particular piece of land for soldier

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

settlement. In the paper's view the land was so patently inappropriate as to suggest some ulterior purpose on the government's part. It was, the paper reminded its readers "the desire that is uppermost in, we believe, every loyalist's mind...that every returned soldier who wishes to go on the land should be given exceptionally good opportunities for making an easy and profitable living."¹⁵ It is clear that the *Huon Times* viewed the government's decision to provide properties for returned men as a reward for military service rather than as a serious business transaction, and therefore believed that such land should promise an easy reward for those services. The paper felt it would be completely wrong of the government to use these men to open up as yet unsettled areas of the state. To ask soldiers to accept this new responsibility was too much. It was enough that the soldier should have won the war against the Germans without being asked on his return to fight this new "War".

The Esperance Council during its debate with the War Council had the bipartisan support of two local members of Parliament: Labor's David Dicker and J. W. Evans of the Liberal Party. As both men were familiar with the area, their support gives the Esperance Council's stand credibility.

In late March Clennett warned that if the Government persisted in its plan to settle men on the land behind Dover then it was sure to lose many thousands of pounds. A letter from P. Schnell of Dover, evoking memories best forgotten, suggested that the Government's plan was, "like a return to old prison days."¹⁶ Schnell shared the concerns of both the Esperance Council and the *Huon Times* but foreshadowed future Government policy when he asked why the War Council didn't, "look around and find them (soldiers) properties on which there is already a house with some cleared land, so that they can get a good start instead of having to wait years for any return."¹⁷

In July the *Huon Times* reported that the government had decided to "definitely (abandon) the wild cat scheme of settling soldiers on the inhospitable heights of Dover."¹⁸ The paper wondered whether anyone would be censured over the money that had been wasted,

¹⁵ *ibid.*, March 17 1916.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, March 21 1916.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*, July 14 1916.

especially as it could have been far better spent on bringing new developments to the area.

The issue's deeper significance lay in the potential damage that had been done within Esperance to the government's future campaign for conscription. People in Dover, now aware of the type of land the Government was considering "giving" to the returned men, no doubt held grave reservations as to the seriousness of the government's intentions. Conversely the fight put up by the Esperance Council had an effect upon the Government's future plans for soldier settlement. What clearly emerged from the issue was the widely held belief within the community that the promise of land for settlement should be both a reward for, and an inducement to, enlistment.^{18A} Such inducement though was still proving to be insufficient when it came to enlistments in the Huon.

Throughout February the government continued its recruiting campaign with limited results. This was primarily due to the health of the recruits rather than to the complete unwillingness of men to come forward. Of 34 men who offered their services at Cygnet seven were rejected and at Geeveston seven out of fourteen were declared to be unfit. Only eight out of 30 were accepted at Franklin while at Dover, no doubt reflecting the torpor of the timber industry, 60 men came forward but only eleven were accepted. Such a high rate of rejection was a cause of concern to many. P.Schnell was convinced that this lack of fitness was due to, "the bad effects of drink"¹⁹ though it would be more appropriate to suggest general working conditions and local dietary habits as the significant factors.

Any concern about the health of the men before enlistment was easily matched by concerns about their return. In March, at a farewell to soldiers at Cygnet, Warden Davies stressed the need for a government assurance that the men going to the front must upon their return be assured of receiving a fair deal. Davies had seen the condition and consequent treatment of men who had returned from the Boer War and claimed that the government must not allow such a situation to occur again. "There had been cases" claimed Davies:

in the Boer War... where men were lionised for a day or two and then forgotten and he considered it one of the greatest problems

¹⁹ *ibid.*, February 29 1916.

that must be solved by those unable to give their services in the field, to see that it no case did a man who perhaps lost his health in fighting our battles suffer pecuniary disadvantage as a consequence of his return.²⁰

From mid-1915 Tasmania had experienced a statewide decline in enlistments, a decline nowhere more marked than in the Huon. A vigorous recruiting drive in early 1916 had failed to improve the situation. By mid-1916, as Lake has noted "indifference to the progress of the war reached a (new) height.... The first excitements and thrill of being at war had faded and the consequent lack of enthusiasm was reflected in the fall in the amounts of patriotic funds raised and the number of men enlisting."²¹ By April the State War Council was calling upon the Federal Government to adopt "some form of compulsory service either within or without the Commonwealth."²² The Somme offensive of July 1916 added a new sense of urgency to these calls.

On 31 July Prime Minister Hughes returned to Australia after an extended visit to England where he had been feted and lionised by leading figures in the worlds of politics, economics and the military. While in England Hughes had come to the conclusion that the war could be won only through a dramatic increase in the allied forces. To achieve this aim Hughes now viewed conscription as a necessity, convinced that the voluntary system of recruitment had been a failure. On 14 September he announced that a referendum on conscription would be held on 28 October.

While the Federal Government set about organising its conscription campaign the State Government of Premier Lee was introducing a Bill for the resettlement of returned men. This Bill, introduced into the House of Assembly in September 1916, was essentially a reworking of the Closer Settlement Act of 1913 so that it now reflected the agreement entered into by the Federal and State authorities over soldier settlement in early 1916.²³ In broad terms the Bill envisaged that soldiers would be settled either on vacant Crown Lands or on larger private properties that would be compulsorily purchased. Only those soldiers who had received

²⁰ *ibid.*, March 3 1916.

²¹ Lake, *A Divided Society*, p.64.

²² PD1/302/212/14/16, 13 May 1916.

²³ Inter-State Conference of Ministers: Adelaide, May 1916., T.J.P.P., Vol LXXV 1916-1917, Paper No 27.

an honourable discharge were to be considered for settlement. The settlers were to be given 99 year leases and were to be charged five percent interest on the capital investment in the land. As an aid to settlement, the first year of the lease was to be interest free. If settlers kept to the terms of their agreement then they would, after ten years, be able to purchase their properties in fee simple. To provide further assistance the Bill allowed for a remission of rates and taxes on the property for the first four years. As well, settlers were allowed an advance of £300 on farm buildings and from early January 1917 an extra £150 for stock, feed and implements. Interest was to be on a sliding scale starting at three and a half percent in the first year and reaching five percent in the fourth and consequent years. The Bill established a Closer Settlement Board, under the responsibility of the Minister for Lands and Works, to oversee the resettlement of the men. This Board was given wide discretionary powers. All monies raised through the scheme were to be paid into a Returned Soldiers Settlement Fund rather than general state revenue so that the Board would have the greatest possible freedom in its dealings with the settlers.

Any returned man who wished to purchase a property had to submit an application to the Board. This application informed the Board of the property the applicant desired, the name of the applicant's unit and period of service, the date and reason for discharge and any particulars of physical disability or disease resulting from service. The applicant also had to list his relevant work experience, the amount of capital he possessed and the assistance he thought he would need to establish himself.

Included in the Bill was a provision for British returned men to take up holdings within the State on the same terms and conditions as local servicemen. The decision to allow these British ex-servicemen to settle in Tasmania resulted from an agreement between the Commonwealth and the British Governments and reflected the happy marriage of two separate though linked interests.²⁴ Many in England believed that the end of the war would see large numbers of their ex-servicemen, now restless and keen on adventure, wishing to emigrate. Fearing that these men might settle in countries having few ties with Empire these people hastened to encourage settlement in

²⁴ *ibid.*

Commonwealth countries so that the cultural and economic links with Empire might be maintained, if not strengthened. For Australia's part, the decision to allow British servicemen to settle in Australia gave access to vitally needed foreign capital. The decision reinforced that traditional economic link by which Australia provided primary produce for the English manufacturers and in return imported manufactured products.

The *Mercury* gave strong support to the legislation, the editor believing that in every way it "guards the soldier from hardships and holds out a helping hand wherever it is needed."²⁵ Newspaper accounts at this time would suggest that many returned men who were in need of such a helping hand. In late September the *Mercury* published a report on one returned man who, having lost his job at the Huon Timber Company, had been forced to live along with his wife and children in a bark hut at Cairns Bay, existing on fish the soldier caught. The family had so far received little help from the government. The Patriotic Fund and their local Parliamentary representative, David Dicker, had managed to provide some assistance ²⁶ but the man had been effectively left to fend for himself.

The Labor Party did not share the *Mercury's* optimism. It believed there had been scant consideration of alternatives to resettlement and that too little provision had been made for returning soldiers who did not wish to take up land. It argued that the Bill placed too big a financial strain on the soldiers and provided less than generous tax provisions. Earle warned parliament that "the soldiers would thank them for nothing if they were going to buy land on the open market and load the land with all the charges."²⁷ He believed the plan to settle returned men on the land to be a mere pretext and claimed the real intention behind the Bill was the cynical plan to open up new farming areas throughout the State. Earle warned that "if the Government wanted to encourage returned soldiers to settle on the land they must look upon such settlement otherwise than as a commercial speculation."²⁸ Earle's colleague, W. A. Woods, shared this concern

²⁵ *Mercury*, September 21 1916.

²⁶ *ibid.*, September 26 1916.

²⁷ *Daily Post*, September 28 1916.

²⁸ *Mercury*, September 28 1916.

and suggested that the Bill, in its present form, "would be condemning returned soldiers to a life of misery by sending them into the backblocks or by placing them on land under such conditions as would break their hearts in a few years."²⁹ Such comments echoed those of the Esperance Council when it had opposed the government's plans to settle men at Dover. Despite such concerns the Bill passed the House of Assembly on party lines and in mid-September reached the Legislative Council.

While the Legislative Council deliberated upon the government's plans for repatriation, Tasmania turned its attention to Hughes' call for conscription. It was a call which would be rejected by the majority of the Huon's electors. Warden Ryan, at the unveiling of the Ranelagh Roll of Honour on 22 September 1922, gave clear voice to such majority belief. Ryan told his audience that Australia was now facing a crisis which required all eligible men to consider whether their efforts were sufficient to win the war. As he pulled aside the veil to disclose the names of those who had already enlisted, Ryan pointed to the space left for the names of yet other men prepared to do their duty. But Ryan was fervently hopeful "that the time would never arrive when they would have to put on that tablet the name of any conscript."³⁰ After all, Ryan argued, enlistment must be a matter for individual conscience, not legislative dictate. Ryan's speech received bi-partisan support from local parliamentarians J. W. Evans and W. E. Shoobridge who also expressed their opposition to conscription. On 26 September the *Huon Times* noted that Australia's casualties had now reached 64 000.

While Ryan rejected conscription others believed there to be little alternative. "Argus" of Glen Huon, stung to action by his neighbours' failure to welcome home A. H. Bester, a local returned soldier, wrote to the *Huon Times* in support of conscription. "May conscription come and let these apathetic spirits know that there is something of vital importance going on in the world, which to them seems of no moment."³¹ In the opinion of "Argus" the only thing the people of Glen Huon were concerned about was three meals a day and the eternal problems of the orchards. At Franklin private Oakford in his farewell speech berated

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *Huon Times*, September 22 1916.

³¹ *ibid.*, September 26 1916.

fellow unionists for the selectivity of their beliefs. He told his listeners that as a Labor man he supported the eight hour day but as the soldiers at the front were at present unable to gain such a condition he had enlisted to help them do so.³²

On 3 October 1916 the *Huon Times* reported Hughes' decision to make use of the Defence Act to call up all single men and widowers without children between the ages of 21 and 35. As Lake noted the move was "a tactical blunder. It strengthened the radical opposition in the labor movement and convinced doubters that, in his impatience to impose conscription, Hughes was indeed a rabid militarist."³³ Many in the Huon felt Hughes' decision would have little effect on recruiting. One report from Cygnet claimed "so many men between these ages and outside it for that matter, have left the district that one would hardly think the number to be enrolled can be very large when the unfit have been culled out."³⁴

The number of men consequently rejected by medical boards seems to bear out this observation. The rejection rate in October continued high. Only fifteen of the 75 men who reported at Huonville were declared fit. At Franklin, the medical board accepted only sixteen of the 63 who reported and at Cygnet fully half the men were rejected.

The State War Council, the central coordinator for the "Yes" vote, wrote to local councils in early October seeking their assistance. The Cygnet Council, following brief discussion, decided that the matter lay outside its responsibilities and decided that the issue was best left as a matter for individual conscience. The Huonville Council refused to vote on the issue. This left the Esperance Council as the only council in the Huon to support the War Council's request. A prime mover behind this decision was Clennett who argued the Council must give support to counteract the widespread anti-conscriptionist sentiment in the area. He claimed such support stemmed from the strong local influence of the I. W. W. and went so far as to suggest that many people were actively pro-German. He viewed the union's stand on conscription as hypocritical for although they "professed to be shocked because men were conscripted to perhaps sacrifice their lives for the liberty of the country,...these same

³² *ibid.*

³³ Lake, *A Divided Society.*, pp.69-70.

³⁴ *Huon Times*, October 3 1916.

people a short time ago saw no shame in reducing a man and his family to starvation if he refused to join a union."³⁵ Clennett was totally dismayed at the strength of the anti-conscription movement in Esperance. It was well organised, ably led and strongly based within the union movement. Clennett felt a strong need for the establishment of a pro-conscription committee for when he "saw men standing on a public platform and slandering the lads who had fought through Gallipoli and France, and not a voice raised in protest, he did not know what the district was coming to."³⁶

In the Huon the leading campaigner against conscription was David Dicker.^{36A} In early October he organised an anti-conscription rally at the local picture theatre in Geeveston. There he told an approving audience that Australia had already contributed more than its fair share towards the winning of the war. He argued that whether a man enlisted or not should be a question for individual conscience and suggested that workers should not be forced to fight in what was clearly a war inspired by the capitalist quest for new markets.



Australian Timber Workers Union Conference, Hobart 1913; David Dicker bottom right.

At Franklin, Dicker met anger. The meeting was so rowdy that the chairman felt it brought shame to the Huon. Such admonition may have had some effect for at Dicker's next meeting he was listened to with

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*, October 17 1916.

patience and respect. This speech, in essence a reiteration of that given earlier at Geeveston, differed in one significant detail. This time Dicker claimed that even if the government managed to introduce conscription it would be small comfort for those at the front, as the government did not have enough transports to convey the conscripts to Europe. The significance of this was not lost on his audience. Orchardists, already experiencing difficulty in finding shipping space for their fruit, might now have to compete with the extra demands on shipping that could result from a pro-conscription vote.

The Federal Government having invoked the Defence Act had also necessarily established exemption courts allowed for under Section IV of that Act. The Court's activities in the Huon would give orchardists further cause for concern. As Robson has noted "the importance of the exemption courts lay in the fact that they brought before everyone a close-to-home example of what would happen if conscription were enforced."³⁷

The first account of the operations of the exemption court appeared in the *Huon Times* of October 20. At the first of these courts, held at Cygnet, Magistrate Wise was reported to be highly critical of the regulations that applied to their operations. He claimed they were too restrictive and that this had forced him to refuse exemptions when he believed they were fully justified. The fact that people applying for exemptions were not allowed the services of a lawyer was a further worry to Wise as he was convinced that many of the men appearing before him were unable to represent themselves adequately.

Such comments would have done little to assuage the fears of the rural worker and his employer, and the exemption figures would seem to justify these fears. Only two of the 51 men who applied to the court for an exemption on the ground that their labours were indispensable to either the orcharding or farming industries received an exemption.^{37A} In contrast some of the exemption court's decisions would have inspired a deep sense of bitterness within the laboring class and no doubt exacerbated old antagonisms. A case in point was that of J. B. Dance who applied for an exemption on the ground that he was a general storekeeper in possession of stock valued at between £1 500 and £1 600. He received an exemption. Another such case was that of Mathew

³⁷ Robson, *The First A. I. F.*, (Melbourne 1970) p.109.

Fitzpatrick, the son of a local Cygnet Councillor. Fitzpatrick claimed an exemption on the ground that he managed a property that reputedly produced some 4 000 cases of apples, valued at nearly £7 000, a year. In his application Fitzpatrick received support from the manager of the local branch of the Commercial Bank and the Cygnet Warden, Arthur Davies. He was given an exemption of three months - well above the average of one month. These cases would have done little to inspire that unanimity of class that the *Huon Times* had so fondly referred to at the beginning of 1916.

Not only did these exemption courts fuel class bitterness they also strengthened anti-German feeling within the Huon. At times Clennett had hovered on the brink of such sentiment but his comments had always been driven more from a sense of exasperation than from a genuine vehemence towards persons of German background. This was not the case with Jeremiah McArthy. When his son was refused an exemption McArthy turned on Wise and demanded that he journey "down to Castle Forbes Bay and rope in the Germans. There are thousands of them there and young men too."³⁸ To protect themselves a number of Huon families of German descent did anglicise their surnames but the majority held few fears for their safety.

As if to underline those fears engendered in labourers by the exemption courts the *Huon Times* in late October reported the closure of yet more mills in Esperance. "The Stanmore mills are all but closed and work will be lesser still soon with more men to be put off. There is the rumour that the Hopetown mill will reopen in a small way, but with the war and bad weather the management are naturally not in a hurry to recommence operations."³⁹ If men who worked on farms and orchards had been refused exemptions then what hope had the unemployed mill workers?

While the *Huon Times* was reporting the closure of these mills it announced its support for conscription. The paper claimed it had adopted this view because it believed the real danger now to be faced by Australia came from the growing power of the unions and the threat they posed to individual freedom. In this belief the *Huon Times* was at one with Clennett. "Was it not", so the paper argued, "by compulsory means

³⁸ *Huon Times*, October 20 1916.

³⁹ *ibid.*

that Trade unionism gained its strength. Men were even threatened with starvation of themselves and their families and in numerous cases suffered physical torture for daring to refuse to join certain unions."⁴⁰ The visit of John Earle to Geeveston in late October to speak in favour of conscription no doubt reassured the *Huon Times* of its belief.

It is not entirely clear why Earle adopted this position. Lake suggests it was the result of a visit to Prime Minister Hughes in Melbourne from which he returned a passionate advocate of conscription. "Like Hughes Earle became an ardent critic of "extremists" in the Labor movement. In Earle's view the war was in direct defence of Australia. If the Labor Party believed in home defence then it should logically agree to send men where defence of that home was most effective - in this case, France."⁴¹ Now an advocate for conscription Earle addressed meetings throughout the state. At Franklin he received a courteous reception as he told the meeting that he considered conscription to be above politics and that, although some might find it strange for him to be standing on a pro-conscriptionist platform, he did not think so. He argued that if Britain lost the war Australia would be open to invasion and "hordes of people would be sent out here."⁴² to populate our open lands. If this happened then union principles would count for little. Earle, while admitting there had already been an unfortunate form of economic conscription, argued that there were still far too many who felt little responsibility for the war. In Earle's view the situation seemed to lack a sense of fair play. The only way to stop the war, he told the meeting, was to win it so that all the men might come home. But to do this, he warned, it would be necessary to send more soldiers to the front.

Earle delivered the same message at Geeveston on 24 October. On this occasion his appearance met with a most hostile reception. While Earle delivered his speech inside the local hall, an anti-conscriptionist meeting, addressed by representatives of the Federated Waterside Union and the Builders Laborers Union, took place outside. At the end of Earle's speech those who had gathered outside the hall "invaded" it for question time, during which each attempt by Earle to speak was howled

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Lake, *A Divided Society*, p72.

⁴² *Huon Times*, October 24 1916.

down with cries of "you're a twister"⁴³ Three returned men who had accompanied Earle on stage were hooted down each time they attempted to speak. Some in the audience suggested they had only enlisted for their own benefit. To widespread cheers these three servicemen were eventually forced to leave the stage.

One of the issues that had most upset Earle's opponents was that he, as a member of the State War Council, had rejected the pension application of a returned man called Sanson. Sanson, a veteran of the Boer War, had been an early enlistee. On arriving in Egypt he had fallen ill and then been repatriated. At the meeting Sanson claimed Earle's signature to be on the letter informing him his pension application had been rejected. Earle claimed no knowledge of the matter. When challenged by someone in the audience, Earle wagered £10 on the truth of his statement. After some weeks it transpired that Sanson had not in fact applied for a pension at all but had instead asked for assistance to establish a business. As such a request was outside the powers of the War Council it had been rejected.

The Sanson affair also led to an attack on Osborne Geeves, Esperance Councillor and avid conscriptionist. One member of the audience shouted at Geeves "you pretend to be a very patriotic man. I'll let the people see what you are like"⁴⁴; he claimed that Geeves had accused Sanson of feigning illness and that he was perfectly capable of pick and shovel work. The accusation caused further uproar.

The Sanson affair is somewhat clouded. While Earle's reply satisfied his accusers Geeves was unable to offer an acceptable explanation. Valid or not, the accusations against Earle and Geeves clearly damaged the cause of conscription in Esperance. The support of a now increasingly isolated Esperance Council no doubt only antagonised what was already a volatile issue. Esperance was clearly hardening its resolve against both conscription and the employer.

Four days before the Referendum the *Mercury* published an article which discussed the problems conscription posed to rural industries. The *Mercury* recognised that as a whole the agricultural districts of Tasmania had given their full quota of men for active service and were now "feeling the pressure resulting from the decrease in the labour

⁴³ *ibid.*, October 24 1916.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, October 27 1916.

available for farm and orchard stations."⁴⁵ The paper noted that conscription left people in rural industries anxious as "fruitgrowers wondered whether they would be able to get sufficient labourers for spraying and other necessary operations."⁴⁶ The paper condemned those anti-conscriptionists who had misinformed the rural sector by their claim that conscription would be used without discrimination. The *Mercury* reassured its readers that this would not be the case. They were reminded that when Prime Minister Hughes addressed meetings in the Hobart City Hall "he took pains to allay the fears on this account, and explained that instructions had been given to the Magistrates constituting the Exemption Courts that in all cases where men liable for service were able to show that they were wanted for rural industries, their applications for exemption should be granted."⁴⁷ According to the *Mercury* men already in camp had only to explain their situation to their officers to be released. They could then return to their farm work until it was completed. The *Mercury* was hopeful that it was not too late to calm the fears of those in the rural sector.

In fact the Huon Exemption Courts had presented a picture markedly at odds with that of Hughes and the *Mercury*. As the majority of Tasmania's population lived in rural districts of which the Huon was typical, conscriptionists clearly had reason to be concerned.

On the eve of the Referendum the *Huon Times* plead for voters to support conscription and reject the efforts of a noisy and unpatriotic few. When the first returns were published a few days later this "noisy and unpatriotic few" had emerged as a small majority. Only the Huon Municipality supported conscription. Cygnet (54%) and Esperance (69 %) both rejected the idea of compulsory military service. The electorate of Franklin recorded the highest Tasmanian vote against conscription.⁴⁸

The reasons for this large No vote in the Huon are reasonably clear. In the south at Esperance, the Huon's "industrial" heart, the vote no doubt reflected the strong union presence in the area, the decided antipathy of many towards the Esperance Council, the growing fear of unemployment

⁴⁵ *Mercury*, October 24 1916.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Figures derived from *Huon Times*, October 31 1916.

and the State Government's aborted attempt to settle returned men at Dover. The Sanson affair had also clearly antagonised many. It is important not to overlook the role the *Daily Post* played in the vote. This paper, established by Hobart businessman Tom Nettlefold and edited by Edmund Dwyer Gray, a leading figure in the early Labor movement, had been the only major daily in Australia to oppose Hughes' call for conscription. In Esperance the paper sold an average 250 copies an issue.

The size of the no vote in Esperance probably reflected a strengthening class division in the region. Many unionists had by now come to believe that the war was fundamentally a war of capitalism with the workers cast in the role of victim. There was a feeling amongst some that the war had given the mill owners an opportunity to move against the unions and in their view the closure of the mills was motivated by industrial considerations rather than war time economic pressures. The *Examiner*, analysing the strong rural no vote, decided that class antagonisms had been a prime motivation. Referring to the large no vote in Campbell Town the paper suggested:

there is a wider gulf between the employer and worker in these rural districts than in other parts, wider than is healthy for the community, and there is no attempt to bridge the gap or lessen it. Dorcas meetings and playing the Lord and Lady Bountiful will not do it, but only the cultivation of that human sympathy which makes all classes kin.⁴⁹

In the north of the Huon, around the orcharding and farming towns of Huonville, Franklin and Cygnet, the situation differed somewhat. Here large numbers of orchardists, concerned at the prospect of labour shortages and shaken by the actions of the exemption courts, voted against conscription. Robson has noted the comment of Governor General Munro Ferguson "that the Referendum had been defeated by Irish-Catholics, the women's vote and a large sector of the agricultural vote, the latter opposing the Government's proposal as a protest against the land being denuded of labour."⁵⁰ Lake suggested that "these farming districts had experienced severe labour shortages and hence the

⁴⁹ *Examiner*, October 31 1916.

⁵⁰ Robson, *The First A. I. F.*, p.117.

figures suggest that farmers, fearful of the worse shortages which would result from conscription, voted no."⁵¹ The evidence in the Huon upholds these comments.

Though the Catholic vote is usually believed to have played a significant role in the anti-conscription vote the evidence suggests that this was not the case in the Huon. Father P. J. O'Flynn, a leading member of the Huon's Catholic community, was a regular speaker at farewells to enlisted men. Published accounts suggest his views differed little, if at all, from other speakers. Although at times there was an undercurrent of sectarian division, the various denominations were at pains to avoid conflict. Early plans to construct a hospital as a war memorial at Ranelagh bear out this point. When it was discovered that the proposed site was on land owned by the Catholic Church it was decided to resite the hospital to neutral ground at Franklin. Although the *Huon Times* attacked the anti-conscriptionist stance of Archbishop Mannix and attempted to link the Irish uprising to German influence, such claims engendered no public outcry within the area. Some believed the Catholic vote to have been of no significance.

In response to a claim by the *Mercury* that Catholics at Port Cygnet had shown themselves to be strong anti-conscriptionists, John McMullen - a leading member of the Anglican community - accused the paper of blatant unfairness. McMullen suggested it was absurd:

for anyone to say that the Catholic vote, or the Irish vote, prevented anything becoming law in the country where they are outnumbered by more than seven to one? In your paper last week you mentioned the strong anti-vote in Esperance and ascribed it to the Irish there. You should know that the Irish there are not one-quarter of the population in that municipality, yet the vote there against conscription was about three against one in favour. How do you account for this?... In the Port Cygnet Municipality I think there are as many non-Catholics as Catholics and if they vote on religious lines wouldn't the vote there be about equal? If you can persuade four out of every seven non-Catholics in the Commonwealth to vote as you desire wouldn't you be able to carry anything you liked? As conscription was turned down about half

⁵¹ Lake, *A Divided Society*, p.81

the non-Catholics of the Commonwealth must have voted against it or failed to vote which in my opinion amounts to the same.⁵²

By the beginning of November the Government's Bill for soldier settlement reached the Legislative Council. The *Mercury* believed repatriation to be one of the most important issues that the state had to face and stressed the necessity of making adequate preparations to "avoid the pauperisation of large numbers of men who certainly deserve something better."⁵³ As the *Mercury* saw it, the central problem with any scheme to settle men on the land was the need to provide a correct balance between "a system of advances so elastic that, while deserving cases will get ready and sympathetic help, the dependence of returned men upon the resources will not be encouraged."⁵⁴

The Legislative Council, though concerned about the welfare of the returned men clearly showed it held greater fears about the threat the resettlement Bill posed to the state's larger landholders. The Council appeared determined to protect those interests. It was particularly worried about the possible effect of two specific clauses: Clause 5 which allowed for compulsory purchase of land and Clause 7 which established the formula under which a portion of the Federal Government's resettlement grant of £150 000 would be spent on the acquisition of private properties or the development of Crown Lands. The Bill proposed the expenditure of the greater amount of this money on the purchase of private properties.

The Council opposed the idea of compulsory purchase on a number of grounds. It argued there were many properties around the state that could easily be purchased in a normal commercial manner and that there was no need to give the Board the power to purchase properties compulsorily. The Council further argued that the use of such power would merely replace one settler by another, and produce no conceivable advantage to the state. The Council was also deeply concerned at the sweeping powers the Bill gave to the Board and demanded that these be

⁵² *Mercury*, May 12 1917.

⁵³ *ibid.*, October 24 1916.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

either reduced or that provision be made for tighter ministerial control. Such concerns were understandable. A well-funded Board, allowed widespread powers and the right to compulsorily purchase properties, would have seemed a threat to many landholders.

The Council moved to protect the large landholders. As has been noted, the Government's Bill for Soldier Settlement was closely based on the Closer Settlement Act of 1913. Under that Act properties valued at over £12 000 had been excluded from compulsory purchase. The Council now moved that the new Bill limit this amount to £6 000. The proposed amendment produced a storm of protest in the House of Assembly, especially among the Labor Party.

Many in the Assembly accused the Legislative Council of being unpatriotic. For the Labor Party, the Council's move only reinforced the long held belief that the upper house represented only the interests of the state's larger landholders. F. Burbury attacked the Council's claim that the power of compulsory purchase was unnecessary and argued that without such a power "the choice of properties in the State suitable for settlement of soldiers was...very limited."⁵⁵ He suggested that though there might very well be, as some Councillors had suggested, many suitable properties throughout the State valued at less than £6 000, it would be difficult to purchase them through ordinary commercial channels. The House of Assembly was convinced the Act had to allow for compulsory purchase so that soldiers might gain access to the best possible properties and the best possible chance of making good. It considered any potential threat the Bill posed to private ownership to be more than outweighed by the moral necessity of repaying the returned men for those sacrifices they had made.

To resolve the deadlock a managers conference was held. The resulting compromise allowed for the compulsory purchase of properties but only those valued at less than £6 000. The Labor Party felt the soldiers had been betrayed. When Lee moved the Council's amendment in the House of Assembly Earle demanded its outright rejection. He argued that the compromise would place too great a restriction upon the operations of the Board and that to exclude properties valued at £6 000 or more from compulsory purchase would severely limit the soldier's access to good land. Earle suggested that although it might be

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

appropriate in the normal course of closer settlement to place monetary restrictions on the purchase of certain properties there was nothing to be said for it in this case when the purchases were designed, "to provide homes for (those) men who were fighting to preserve the homes and liberties of all of us" ⁵⁶

The Minister for Lands, J. B. Hayes, suggested Earle's intransigence would do little to help the soldiers. The House of Assembly had to make such a concession to ensure the passage of the Bill. Earle told Hayes that he viewed such an argument as the "utterance of a weak man, a man who when he sees that conditions forced upon him are wrong, proposes to compromise and accept wrong."⁵⁷ Parliament now adjourned until the following day.

When the debate resumed Earle continued to attack the Government over its willingness to accept the Legislative Council's amendment. He suggested that the actions of the Government and the Legislative Council "justified the taunts often made that the proper thing would not be done for the soldiers when they returned."⁵⁸ Lee, while admitting some sympathy with Earle's position, reminded parliament that the compromise must be accepted, otherwise it was likely the whole Bill would be lost. If this happened, the soldiers would be left with nothing. James Belton said it appeared to him:

to be a question of whether they could have any legislation of a patriotic character if property was concerned. The people of the State would learn a lot from this lesson. They would know what to expect from those who represented property. He was sorry a branch of the Tasmanian legislature was so unpatriotic.⁵⁹

Burbury, in what appeared to be something of an about face, now moved to reassure the House that any concessions made to the Legislative Council would have little effect in practice. He was convinced there were many properties throughout the State readily available for resettlement so there would be little, if any need, for the Government to make compulsory purchases.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, October 8 1916.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, October 24 1916.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, December 8 1916.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

Such reassurances were far from convincing. David Dicker warned that the compromise would only encourage property owners to unload "the dead horse on the soldier."⁶⁰ Along Party lines the House of Assembly agreed to the Legislative Council's amendment to Clause 5.

The other point of difference that existed between the two Houses related to Clause 7 and the government's intention to spend the greater proportion of the Federal Government's grant on the purchase of private property. The majority of Legislative Councillors were convinced that the grant should be spent mainly on the settlement and sustenance of returned men on Crown land. In their view this had always been the Federal Government's intention; to use resettlement grants to open up productive lands throughout the Commonwealth. There was, however, division within the Legislative Council on this point. H. A. Nichols argued that recent experience had shown settlement on Crown Lands to be a near impossibility and suggested using the grant for such a purpose would be inviting disaster. Others, especially F. Bond and A. W. Loone, disagreed. They warned that if the major proportion of the money was spent on the purchase of private land there would be little left to help the settler establish himself. After all, they suggested, there had as yet been no assurance from the Federal Government that further monies would be made available for resettlement purposes.

Despite such arguments, Nichols remained adamant that the majority of the grant should be used to purchase private properties. He was convinced that when the money ran out many of the settlers would merely leave their Crown Land selections. Nichols felt many had underestimated the physical and emotional effects the war had had on the soldiers. "The years of service at the front" Nichols claimed "would unfit many of the soldiers who had been brought up on the land for country life."⁶¹ Nichols believed small blocks of private land would prove to be the most suitable for settlement. Any idea of settling returned men on Crown Land was courting disaster.

The discussion of Clause 7 led to renewed attacks on the operations of the Board. C. H. Hall claimed he could not understand what reasoning lay behind the Board's insistence on purchasing private properties while J. Hope questioned the Board's ability to manage those

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*, November 2 1916.

properties already purchased. Hope claimed that a great deal of the land the Board had "purchased up to the present time was not suitable for returned soldiers or even for the average farmer to deal with"⁶² and claimed many properties had been purchased at prices which were much too high. "It was clear to him," said Hope, "that the Closer Settlement Board considered only one class, and that was not the returned soldier."⁶³ It was a point upon which the rabid Tory Hope and the Labor radical Dicker could happily agree.

Following lengthy debate the Legislative Council decided to amend Clause 7, proposing to divide the Federal Government's grant equally between the purchase of private properties and the development of Crown Lands. The decision met with strong resistance. C. E. Davies considered the Council had lost sight of the real issue; the settlement of the returned men on the land. He was convinced some Councillors, at the expense of soldier's interests, had shown themselves to have been far too ready to use resettlement as a pretext for developing the state's vacant lands. At the ensuing managers conference the Legislative Council compromised. It agreed to one - sixth of the grant being used for settlement on Crown Lands - the remainder to be spent on the purchase of private property.

The actions of the Legislative Council had not gone unnoticed. In late November "Ajax in Parliament" a columnist for the *Daily Post*, suggested "returned soldiers...note these little proceedings"⁶⁴ as they indicated the "patriotism" of some in the legislature. It was clear to both "Ajax" and others that the Legislative Council's aim from the outset had been the protection of property rather than concern for the soldier's welfare.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Daily Post*, November 23 1916.

Chapter Four.

Ambiguous Years: 1917-1918.

By early January 1917 many of the Huon's leading political and business figures had become convinced that the state's war strained economy precluded all hope of new development. More significant was their belief that the growing power of local unions, so influential in the 1916 conscription referendum, had to be destroyed. As one Huon Councillor noted there "was also another battle to be fought sooner or later, and that was the extermination of the I. W. W."¹ To underline these concerns, a renewed recruiting drive in January 1917 met with only limited success. Such response was far from unique. As Lake commented "compared to the city there was little interest in recruiting in the country areas and little effort to promote any."²

An air of despondency now infused those responsible for recruitment. At Franklin it was suggested, more in desperation than hope, that returned men might be employed to manage orchard so their owners might be released for active service. The Esperance committee considered any attempt to encourage enlistments to be a waste of time. One member complained "there are a lot of people who are going about as though they did not know the war was on."³ The Huonville Win The War Committee, bereft of new ideas, called upon Prime Minister Hughes to reintroduce his conscription plebiscite. The *Huon Times* was more convinced than ever that the conscription debate had engendered a dangerous division within the community. Earle's departure from the Labor Party in January 1917 exemplified such division: an especially popular politician in Franklin, his stand on conscription had left him no alternative. His letter of resignation echoed the feelings of many when he claimed that certain unionists posed "a greater menace to the freedom, liberty and national life of Australia than the Hun"⁴ In March Earle resigned his seat in the House of Assembly to take up the vacated Senate seat of Labor's R. K. Ready.

¹ *Huon Times*, January 16 1917.

² Lake, *A Divided Society*., p86.

³ *Huon Times*, February 9 1917.

⁴ Lake, *op cit* p87.

community leaders who argued for development and those who believed the primary responsibility of government to lie in winning the war. Such polarisation was evident during a pre-selection meeting at Franklin. Warden Ryan, in seeking a candidate who "understands our position, who is in sympathy with our wants and aims and ambitions, and who will put them before the House of Assembly, and I feel that we will get what we have been looking for a long time, and that is justice."⁷ stood squarely for development. Ryan met with opposition from V. Hall, the local Church of England Minister, who argued the importance of placing "men in both houses of Parliament who were determined upon winning the war."⁸ Hall was especially scathing of the Labor Party, claiming it to be indifferent as to whether the Germans won the war or not.

Throughout the election Liberal candidates received strong support from the *Huon Times*. Great stress was laid upon their solid farming backgrounds, their support for development in the Huon, their belief that Australia must maintain close links with Empire and their rejection of what was considered to be the irresponsible push by the unions for increased wages and improved working conditions. In contrast Labor's J. Craig received scant coverage. The *Huon Times* claimed Craig "in his platform utterances....failed to show either by education or natural ability that he would be a suitable representative for the district."⁹ The Liberal Party's Pierce was singled out for special praise following his criticism of the government's proposal to settle men on Crown Lands: "Nothing was too good for the returned men. The best we could do was only a poor return for the man who had offered his life for his country, and it was ridiculous to talk of asking him to carve out a home in the bush."¹⁰ Pierce instead suggested the government purchase and subdivide selected properties so that an experienced man might be settled beside a returned soldier. This would provide the returned man with assistance during those first difficult years.

Although the election polarised the community's leaders it seems to have inspired little enthusiasm amongst the general population, only

⁷ *Huon Times*, March 20 1917.

⁸ *ibid.*, April 17 1917.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

fifty percent of whom cast a vote. The *Huon Times* believed the war to have "undoubtedly been responsible for the apathy that is so general regarding the issue."¹¹ The paper was pleased though that "all the candidates (were) prepared to support legislation making adequate provisions for the soldiers who return from the front"¹² but regretted that none of them had proposed "any definite scheme by which this desirable end would be achieved."¹³

Although the Liberal League won the seat the Labor Party received considerable support in the Huon gaining 47% of the overall vote.¹⁴ The voting pattern again served to emphasise the industrial and political division of the area. Around Huonville Labor only managed to attract 28% of the vote: at Esperance the figure was 66%. In timber towns such as Raminea, Recherche, Southport, Surgess Bay and Hastings Labor received 83% of the vote. The pattern of voting paralleled that of the conscription referendum of 1916 and suggested the Dicker affair had in no way diminished support for Labor. If anything the strength of the unions may have increased. In April Dicker was elected to the Esperance Council as representative for the ward of Southport. He now became a member of that very body which had so long opposed him.

Despite the economic constraint of a war time economy and the determination of some to solely focus the Huon's attention on victory there were still those who steadfastly pushed for development. The railway might have to wait but the reclamation works at Franklin and the development of a port at Port Huon were still viewed to be essential. By 1917 the Minister for Lands and Works, J. B. Hayes, was considering two possible sites for a port. One, the so called "shallow site", was at Shipwrights Point while the other, known as the "deepwater site", was in Hospital Bay. The shallow site restricted shipping to Hobart while the deepwater site allowed for both interstate and overseas trade. The

¹¹ *ibid.*, April 13 1917.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Figures taken from *Huon Times* 1917.

growers' preference for the Hospital Bay site now attained some urgency. Unlike the timber industry the apple industry had so far been largely unaffected by the war.^{14A} Now, however, the financial strain that had been placed upon the British economy by the stalemate in Europe and the successful German submarine war against allied shipping posed a real threat to the orchardists. Any advantage that they might receive could prove the difference between success or failure. The proposed deepwater site offered a real chance to break the monopoly that growers had long believed to be firmly held by middlemen in Hobart.

By 1917 the government, following a series of hydrographical surveys and with economies uppermost in mind, decided on Shipwrights Point as the site for the new jetty. The growers and mill owners opposed the decision and pressed the cause of Hospital Bay. The Esperance Council gave ready support. It believed that direct shipping to the mainland or Europe "would make all the difference between profit and loss in regard to the timber industry while the advantage to the fruit industry by the saving of handling (on fruit) was obvious to anyone."¹⁵

In April Hayes visited the Huon to discuss the issue with representatives of the local councils.^{15A} He urged them to adopt the government's plan arguing that any consideration of Hospital Bay would lead to an expensive and lengthy delay due to the necessity of further surveys. Hayes argued that any possible restriction on direct access to markets was more than outweighed by the increasing competition local orchardists faced from Victorian growers. He warned growers they should spend more time solving this problem than discussing sites for a port. The growers were unswayed by such arguments, maintaining that the Huon needed direct access to overseas and interstate markets: the 1d to be saved on each of the 1 000 000 cases shipped annually would easily pay for the port. What was a saving to the grower though was a potential loss to the shipper, especially Henry Jones. It was clear to the orchardists that their problem was not so much the intransigence of government but the powerful influence that Hobart shippers and their Marine Board wielded over Government policy. By May growers were discussing the formation of their own Marine Board at Geeveston. After all, they argued, as the Huon annually shipped a greater tonnage than

¹⁵ *Huon Times*, March 25 1917.

the Port of Launceston it had a good claim to a Marine Board of its own. Some locals disagreed believing that such a proposal would only serve the growers interests and that to impose an added tax burden on the labourers must prove inequitable.

The *Huon Times* supported the proposal claiming that for too long the Huon had allowed its business "to be managed by Hobart merchants and shippers."¹⁶ In July an article laden with venom castigated those opposed to the Hospital Bay site, branding them as "ultra-conservatives". The *Huon Times* imputed sinister motives to their actions, claiming that they were "allying themselves with a small section of merchants and shippers in Hobart who will undoubtedly be the losers by the establishment of direct trade between the Huon and the mainland."¹⁷ For the Huon the siting of the port had become a test of the government's independence from those who had a vested interest in the centralisation of shipping in Hobart.

While growers continued their agitation for an overseas and interstate jetty, events in Europe finally overtook them. In late 1917 the English Government announced it was to restrict import to those materials deemed essential to the war effort. For the orchardist the decision was devastating and there were immediate calls for the Federal Government to accept responsibility for the industry. As the Federal Government had already accepted such responsibility when the meat, wool, wheat and hop industries had been threatened by the war, growers felt their claim to be merely a call for equity. Despite several approaches to both the Federal and State governments little assistance was forthcoming.^{17A} One suggestion that the Imperial Government purchase 500 000 cases of dried fruit at a low 7 1/2 d a case was rejected on the ground that a lack of water on the battlefields would create insuperable difficulties in the preparation of the fruit in cooking. In September Senator Earle asked the Federal Government to purchase 8 500 000 cases of dried fruit at "bedrock" prices so as to provide growers with some return on their crop. Nothing came of the idea. The industrial unrest then occurring on mainland wharves did little to reassure the orchardists and much to inspire anti-union feeling in the Huon.

In October a meeting of growers at Cygnet expressed the fear that they

¹⁶ *ibid.*, May 29 1917.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, July 20 1917.

faced ruin. The local Catholic priest, Father P. J. O'Flynn, warned that unless the Federal Government moved soon to control the markets "it will not be the Belgian poor we will contribute to next season but the hungry and poor neighbours in our midst."¹⁸ He claimed many of the families of unemployed men were already starving and he was fearful that many more would soon join them. O'Flynn blamed this increasing hardship on the steep rise in the price of sugar, flour and meat: the result of the prolonged industrial dispute on mainland wharves. There were some at the meeting who believed local shopkeepers to have been less than patriotic when setting their prices. Others, who believed the very future of the Huon at stake, began to question the motives behind the war. The crisis appeared to offer little hope to those soldiers who would return to the Huon.

In late October the Federal Government, following further approaches from Earle, agreed to purchase 150 000 cases of dried fruit at 5d a pound. The offer promised the growers a paltry 10d a bushel. It was an offer greeted with derision.^{18A}

The uncertainty over the 1918 crop had an immediate effect on property prices. In November the *Huon Times* reported the value of many orchards in the Cygnet area to have dropped to a third of their pre-war value. The Huonville Council, reacting to what it claimed had been a 20% fall in growers' incomes over the past two years, reduced the rateable value of orchards in the municipality. The Esperance council soon followed suite. By December the future of the 1918 crop was uncertain though the growers now expected the worst.

While the growers' concerns intensified, the Federal Government announced its intention to hold a further referendum on conscription. Throughout 1917 a series of recruiting drives in the Huon had met with a singular lack of success. In July the *Huon Times* reported one such drive at Huonville to have been a failure because of the decided preference that young men held for "studying the mysteries of pool in the billiard room opposite."¹⁹ The central recruiting committee in Hobart was by now convinced far too many Tasmanians were taking the war too lightly and as Lake noted "launched an onslaught on balls, dances, race

¹⁸ *ibid.*, October 16 1917

¹⁹ *ibid.*, July 24 1917

meetings and football matches."²⁰ The movement soon spread to the Huon when, at a meeting of the Huonville Recruiting Committee, it was moved that the annual Shipwrights Point Regatta be postponed. One member claimed there were now more social activities in the Huon than ever before. Another argued such activities had led the people to adopt a light hearted attitude to the war and suggested "people ought seriously consider the desirability of curtailing cricket, football and other sports, which were doing a lot to lull the people into a false sense of security."²¹ The motion was lost ten votes to three, the majority believing that the adoption of such a motion would only serve to further antagonise those who already showed little if any interest in recruiting. After all, it was argued, the community had its own life to lead. A recruiting drive in November only managed to attract eight volunteers: four from Franklin, two at Geeveston and one each from Dover and Huonville.

The conscription referendum of 1917, like the recruiting drives of the same year, seems to have inspired little interest. In early November the *Huon Times* in a mild and even-tempered editorial reiterated its support for conscription. The editor argued that as the voluntary system had failed to produce the required number of enlistments the Federal Government had been left with little alternative. In attempting to stress the importance of the issue the paper claimed "we are surely fighting on the battlefields of Europe for our homes as though the Hun had actually invaded our shores."²² The paper suggested conscription to be the only fair method of maintaining enlistments as it placed "the defence of a country equitably upon the manhood of a nation (and) appeals to all fair minded citizens."²³ The editor claimed he was confident that this time conscription would meet with the elector's approval but warned that if it were rejected the country might find itself slipping into chaos.

The Huon Time's coverage of the issue was meagre. This may have been due to the brevity of the campaign or may have evidenced disinterest. As the polling day neared the *Huon Times* claimed such disinterest was "not confined to either Conscriptionists or anti-conscriptionists as advocates of neither side have so far been able to

²⁰ Lake, *A Divided Society*., p108.

²¹ *Huon Times*, October 19 1917.

²² *ibid.*, November 9 1917.

²³ *ibid.*

create any pronounced demonstrations of enthusiasm."²⁴ The prevailing feeling seems to have been that it was all a waste of time and money. The most noticeable difference between the referendum of 1916 and that of 1917 was the more active role that was played by both the returned men and women's groups.

Not surprisingly the *Huon Times* had little to say about the referendum result. The electorate of Franklin was one of only six in Australia to have reversed its position on conscription. The Huon municipality had recorded a small increase in the no vote which now reached 35% Huonville itself recorded a three to one vote in favour of conscription but the towns of Castle Forbes Bay, Glen Huon and Pelterata had all swung from Yes to No. At Cygnet the marginal Yes vote of 1916 became a definite No as 58% voted against conscription. In Esperance the No vote stood at 72%: no town in the municipality recorded a majority in favour of conscription. The size of this No vote in Esperance reiterated the hold that the unions had in the area. At Cygnet and Huonville it is clear that many orchardists perceived conscription to be a real threat to their labour needs and voted accordingly. As well, Cygnet's higher than average Catholic population and its growing problem with unemployment must also be regarded as potentially significant factors in the vote.^{24A}

Though rejecting conscription the Huon still maintained a vital interest in the Government's plans for soldier settlement. A small number of returned men had already taken up properties and there was the determination that they should receive the best treatment possible. In late November the *Huon Times* attacked the government's plan to resettle soldiers on large estates. Better, the paper claimed, to let the men choose properties of their own in areas with which they were familiar. The paper strongly supported the ideas of William Shoobridge, a prominent orchardist from the Derwent Valley, who had suggested property owners be asked either to make a gift of a piece of land to a returned man or to rent such land on a nominal basis for a few years. For the *Huon Times* the most attractive aspect of the idea lay in the fact that returned men would be distributed amongst friends and so "be more likely to get assistance and make a success of his occupation than if he

²⁴ *ibid.*, December 7 1917.

were located on a Government settlement."²⁵

Not all sympathetised with the Shoobridge scheme. The Esperance Council felt it placed too great a responsibility upon the soldier to make his own way back into the community when clearly such responsibility lay with government. The Council believed the government's recent decision to establish Local Advisory Boards, a decision prompted by a request from the Table Cape Municipal Council, offered the best protection of the soldiers' interests.^{25A} These Boards provided a sensible compromise between the soldiers' desire to purchase properties of their own choice and the requirement that government act to protect their interests. Composed as these Boards would be of practical minded local men it was felt their advice would assure the returned man his best guarantee of success. David Dicker also strongly advocated the use of such committees believing they would ensure returned men were not placed on properties "they (had) no hope of getting a living off."²⁶

The establishment of these Local Advisory Boards underlined the significant shift in government policy that occurred at the end of 1917. There had been no provision for such Boards under the Returned Soldiers Settlement Act of 1916. Indeed they would have been superfluous as the Government's plans had been entirely focused upon resettling soldiers on either Crown Lands or small properties carved from larger estates. Such a plan had received ready support from the Labor Party. Labor had long believed that the breaking up of these large estates would reduce the conservative influence and power of their owners, especially their disproportionate representation in the Legislative Council. But the government had soon been forced to a de facto change in resettlement policy. Indeed, the government had contemplated such changes as early as December 1916 when Lee, in a submission to Cabinet, had suggested it would be wise policy "to encourage soldiers to find land for themselves, and, if they can make terms satisfactory to the Board, will finance these transactions. In this way the returned soldiers will be distributed over the productive lands of the State, and general satisfaction will be given."²⁷

The experiences of 1917 would only underline the necessity for such

²⁵ *ibid.*, November 27 1917.

²⁶ *ibid.*, November 16 1917.

²⁷ PD1/302/212/1/16, 21 December 1916.

changes. Few soldiers who returned in that year exercised the option of taking up Crown Lands. Those who did so found the land to be poor, often that rejected by previous settlers as unprofitable, and soon vacated their leases. The acquisition of large estates had also proved difficult. This was mainly due to the Legislative Council's decision to exclude properties valued at more than 6 000 from compulsory purchase but it was also a reflection of the Lee government's reluctance to make these compulsory purchases. But the most pressing reason behind the government's new policy was undoubtedly that decided preference of returned soldiers to purchase properties in areas with which they were familiar. Lee was only too ready to accede to such requests. The growing power and influence of the returned men ensured such a decision to be, at least in a political sense, a most responsible decision on Lee's part. As well the new approach was particularly appropriate for an area such as the Huon which had few estates suited to subdivision and then at only what would be a prohibitive cost.

Not all were happy with the Government's new policy. Philip Perry, President of the Closer Settlement Board, warned Minister Hayes of the possible dangers that might flow from its adoption. Perry was concerned that if these properties ever came back into the hands of government they would be hard to maintain and difficult to relet. He saw little benefit to the state in their purchase believing it merely meant replacing one man with another and no new productive lands would be opened up in the process. Of course the overriding fear behind Perry's position was the threat such a policy posed to government finances. In selecting their own properties the soldiers left themselves at the mercy of real estate agents and those who saw the profit to be made from resettlement. If the government remained the sole purchaser it might be able to impose controls on the values of the properties it purchased: to allow the soldier to enter the marketplace on his own, perhaps in competition with others, invited a sharp increase in the value of land. Such an increase could only add to the soldier's eventual indebtedness, an indebtedness that would eventually be borne by the taxpayer. Despite such fears Perry reluctantly agreed that "by the judicious purchase of estates in various parts of the island"²⁸ it must be possible to satisfy the desires of both the soldiers

²⁸ Agricultural Bank Files (AB) 19/4/104.

and the Board. Perhaps inspired by patriotic motives, Perry allowed that "properties should be acquired in the Huon district from which so many men (had) enlisted."²⁹ Hayes, while prepared to acknowledge such concerns, had still to inform Perry that:

the government have fully considered this matter and while agreeing that the subdivision of large estates is better yet it cannot alter its policy at the present time. At the same time for the reasons you state, great care must be taken in the purchase of farms to prevent them coming back to the Government.³⁰

The government seemed tentative in its new policy. Such nervousness was shown in a personal annotation by the Minister for Lands, Alex Hean, on a letter of application from a soldier who sought a property at Nichols Rivulet. When purchasing the property, Hean was careful to warn the Board that:

great care must be taken in the purchase of orchard properties and I want an assurance....that the Board is of the opinion that the applicant can make a fair living and that if the property comes back to the Government it can be relet without loss. Great care must be made in seeing that the applicant is suitably experienced and reliable, as in unskilled hands an orchard can easily depreciate in value, very rapidly.³¹

As an orchardist Hean knew the dangers attendant upon their poor management. The orchardist's year passed in a practised rhythm which when broken quickly turned a valuable asset into a liability. The orchardists when voting in the recent conscription referendum had no doubt held this fact clearly in mind.

Perry remained cautious about the government's new policy. On December 6 1917 he wrote of these concerns to the Secretary of the Board, J. L. McGough, complaining that "if it were not the policy of the Government to buy these small areas, I should never recommend them, as I consider they are a very risky proposition, especially South of Hobart."³² On December 8 the acting President of the Board, G. C. Rudge, showed sympathy with Perry's views, warning that although it

²⁹ AB1.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ AB 19/182.

³² *ibid.*

might be "the desire of the Government to assist returned men of this class and need to orcharding I fail to see how it can be done without risking something."³³

Despite such widespread concern about the government's new policy, the Board's annual report for 1917-18 placed it in the best possible light. The Board reported that "generally speaking, intending settlers prefer to take up "ready made" farms in districts with which they are acquainted,"³⁴ and suggested that this often proved to be a good step as these properties were well equipped with buildings and fences, something that the settler found difficult to provide from the small advance allowed under the Act. The report acknowledged the Board's difficulty in "securing properties which might be regarded as good State investments, and at the same time provide full living for the men settled."³⁵ and expressed a concern that when pursuing the government's revised policy "in many cases what are considered by the Board to be exorbitant prices are asked by the vendors, and negotiations for suitable properties have failed."³⁶ The Board was careful though to reassure parliament of the great care taken when purchasing properties, especially orchards.

Before the Board purchased any property it usually received valuations from three different sources: the Board's own valuator, the local agricultural officer (in the Huon the Fruit Inspector) and the newly established Local Advisory Boards. Their often different valuations were then merged so the Board could make its offer.

Despite the Board's optimistic report some were still far from convinced of the wisdom of settling men at this particular time. J. T. H. Whitsitt, during a debate in Parliament involving some minor amendments to the Resettlement Act, suggested that although essentially sympathetic to the government's plan, he believed the time was wrong: the present world wide economic downturn had created a poor market for orchard produce and there was now the added difficulty of obtaining adequate transportation. Whitsitt suggested Parliament might just as well ask the men to run into the Derwent as place them on

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Closer Settlement Board Report for 1917-18, T. J. P. P., Volume LXXIX, 1918-19, Paper No 40.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

the land.³⁷

The early months of 1918 saw the state's orchardists still caught in great uncertainty over that year's export crop.^{37A} The English government's decision to place restrictions upon the import of non-essential goods still threatened. In January there was some hope when the English government announced it would purchase 600 000 bushels of dried fruit at 7d a bushel. The decision offered growers at least a small return and promised their survival until the next season when trade might return to normal.

By late February the growers' hopes faded when they learned the English government's offer stipulated that payments for the fruit would not be made until two months after the fruit had reached England. Such a delay meant growers would have to find credit to carry them through the intervening months. If that credit was not readily available then there would be a serious delay in the planting of next year's crop: a delay that could mean the difference between ultimate success or failure.

The news proved doubly disastrous. Encouraged by the English decision to import dried fruit, the Huon's evaporating factories had immediately begun to expand their processing capacity. Such expansion had necessitated the borrowing of money at high rates of interest and the plants now faced huge losses. If they were to close, the growers would lose one of the few outlets left and many now believed they would be fortunate if they received a return sufficient to cover costs.

In March the growers yet again approached the Federal Government stressing that "whatever is to be done must be done at once or it will be too late."³⁸ They feared that the present crisis would leave them "down and out" and that their traditional markets would be lost to North American and South African growers. The *Huon Times* summed up the growers' difficulties stressing the central role shippers had played in the matter:

No sooner is he (the grower) finished with the problems of the primary producer and...his fruit safely gathered and packed than he is up against adverse market conditions in the shape of bad handling on the boats used to convey his produce to the various

³⁷ *Mercury*, September 26 1917.

³⁸ *Huon Times*, March 1 1918.

centres and then being placed in many instances at the mercy of agents who would give the wily Chinese a beating at his own game.³⁹

Premier Lee now approached the Federal Government with the proposal that it pay the growers 65% of the English offer immediately after their fruit was delivered to the wharf. The proposal provided the growers with an immediate return and left the cost of the deferred payments to the Federal Government. At the end of March the Federal Government announced its acceptance of the Lee proposal, but on the understanding that the money was to be a loan, the interest on which had to be paid by the growers. The English Government would then be left to pay the balance in line with its original offer that is two months after the arrival of the fruit in England. Although unhappy with the plan the growers had little alternative but to accept and hope that the situation would improve by the following season.^{39A}

While the growers looked forward with little more than hope to the 1919 season, a parliamentary report from Dr. C. L. Park, the state's Chief Health Officer, threw disturbing light on the workers' conditions in the Huon. The report provides valuable evidence as to some of the causes of union unrest. Park had inspected 28 houses owned by the Huon Timber Company at Hastings, and considered only two to be suitable for human habitation. As the majority of the houses lacked drain pipes, fresh drinking water was in short supply. Water for drinking, taken from the local creek, was contaminated by cow dung and human excrement. There was no adequate nightsoil service, and waste was often taken just a few hundred yards along a nearby road and dumped at its side. Such conditions meant serious outbreaks of typhus were inevitable.

At least two members of the Local Council, Clark and Dicker, blamed the situation on the Huon Timber Company, claiming "it was an outrageous thing that people should be charged rent for premises which were unfit for human habitation."⁴⁰ Warden Geeves defended the company. He claimed the workers were prepared to accept the conditions as the company only charged them a nominal rental of 1s a week. The houses themselves were some of the first to be erected and this, coupled with the low rents, meant that it was uneconomic to effect

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, January 15 1918.

repairs. In any case, suggested Geeves, everyone knew that mill hands were a notorious floating population who took no pride at all in their accommodation. Clark replied that in Dr. Park the area had finally found a health inspector who was "outside the mill influence"⁴¹ so the workers might now at least hope for an unbiased consideration of their needs. Without such help the workers would continue to suffer at the hands of the mill owners.

The problem of health was only one aspect of the difficulties mill workers faced. Park's report was a partial documentation of the general malaise then prevalent throughout the Esperance region. The commencement of war had led to a rapid decline in milling and widespread unemployment. Many men, seeing little future in the area, had moved elsewhere to seek employment; a number had enlisted. A discernible air of depression had begun to fall on these outlying areas of the Huon.

The Government's decision to construct a jetty at Hospital Bay, the orchardists' preferred site, brought some hope to the Huon though Minister Hayes warned the decision would not provide a complete solution to the Huon's growing economic plight.^{41A} In his opinion, it was most unlikely that interstate boats would be prepared to make regular calls at Geeveston. A later upgrading of the port might allow for interstate vessels but the government had no intention of carrying out such work in the foreseeable future. Despite Hayes's comments the growers were pleased with the decision: a decision that encouraged the belief that when necessary pressure was placed upon government anything was possible. The key to success was persistence and organisation.

There was further good news in July when Hayes officially announced the commencement of the Franklin reclamation scheme. With the new dredge operating it was hoped the work would soon be completed allowing interstate boats to use the wharf. It was hoped too that the reclaimed land would prove attractive to new industries. Warden Ryan assured those gathered for the official commencement of dredging that they would soon see "instead of the present swamp...one of the finest promenades in the state."⁴²

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*, July 30 1918.

The increasing frequency with which men were returning to the Huon from the war also offered some sense of hope. Speakers at welcome home celebrations spoke glowingly of the heroic stature of the men and of the great deeds they had performed, deeds that were defining a new Australia. In October the state's Chief Justice, Sir Herbert Nicholls, a vociferous Protestant and Empire loyalist, when unveiling the Esperance Roll of Honour at Geeveston, referred to this new Australia. He told the crowd of 700 that "the men whose names were on the Board had contributed to what he regarded as the making of a new Australia - an Australia which, for the first time, a whole civilised world recognised and admired - and their status now and henceforth must always be better than those who had not gone to war."⁴³ It is clear that a new and powerfully emotive force had entered the Australian consciousness. The experiences of those men who had served in the war now set them apart from all others. In success or failure such new found status would render these men near "untouchable".

The best news of all was the war's end on 11 November. At Franklin a small brass band led a large gathering of people in procession. The blare of motor car horns, the scream of the S. S. Waldemar's siren and the whistle of the dredge broke the silence of the night. Many, in disbelief, checked the accuracy of the news with Post Master Wright while others sang hymns of thanksgiving. With the exception of a few hardy revellers, most were in bed by midnight.

Huonville, though in festive mood on the Monday evening, restrained itself until the following day for its celebrations which centred on a procession which moved from Ranelagh to the Huonville Town Hall. Although returned men held a prominent place in the procession, the *Huon Times* felt the most notable feature to have been the sheer number of motor vehicles on display. No doubt the paper was convinced that this display belied the persistent talk of doom and gloom.

Never before in the history of the district has anything like such an assemblage of vehicles been together. The line was considerably over a mile in length and included every class of vehicle that could be drawn or propelled along the road. Most of them too, were tastefully decorated with flowers and shrubs, and nearly all carried

⁴³ *ibid.*, October 1 1918.

one or more national flags.⁴⁴

At Cygnet the ringing of bells and the firing of rockets brought people into Mary Street on the Monday night. While speeches were made, some fired rifles into the air. During the celebrations someone was seen pushing a barrel along the road, an activity that led most of the town's young men to believe that here was a chance to begin the true celebration. They were to be disappointed, for the supposed barrel of beer turned out to be a barrel of tar intended for use in the bonfire lit outside the post office. In poignant imagery, these young men were reported later standing around gazing at the fire, their faces registering "mixed feelings of joy and disappointment."⁴⁵

On the following Tuesday afternoon a general holiday was declared in Cygnet and a procession, led by the Fruitgrowers Band and the local school children, marched to the Town Hall where they were addressed by Father O'Flynn. O'Flynn, like Nicholls, was convinced the war had led Australia to a new-found sense of maturity, that it had been in a very real sense Australia's baptism as a nation. For O'Flynn "Australia had gone to war as a colony and come out of it one of the greatest nations."⁴⁶

In early December such new found optimism was cut short by the announcement that there would be no shipping space available for apples in 1919. The *Huon Times* railed at what it believed to be such blatant unfairness. With all other producers promised shipping, why were the orchardists to suffer such treatment. The paper called upon the Federal Government to provide some form of immediate assistance to growers otherwise the value of the state's orchards would decrease "with the result that the State and Federal Government's revenues will suffer."⁴⁷

The end of the year also witnessed declining optimism over the government's plan to settle the ever-increasing number of returned soldiers. In August G. M. Foster voiced concern about the Board's operations. Foster, an ex-servicemen, had been instrumental in the formation of a "soldiers' and patriots' political league" - an organisation that aimed "to secure more power and influence for (Foster) and his

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, November 12 1918.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, December 25 1918.

fellows"⁴⁸ and provide them with political representation. As such Foster held himself to be a spokesman for ex-servicemen's interests. Foster was convinced the Board was purchasing properties at too high a price and allowing them to be taken up by men of little or no qualification. He accused the Board of placing the interests of returned men before sound economic practice, arguing that a man's service to his country provided no automatic right to resettlement. No doubt Foster was also concerned about the dismal prospects such resettlement offered the returned man. Foster especially queried the Board's purchase of orchards, believing that in the present depressed climate many settlers must fail leaving their unsaleable properties in the hands of government. The purchase of such properties had forced Foster to consider the ultimate cost of the scheme, a cost that he believed would eventually have to be borne by the taxpayer. The *Huon Times* was also concerned about the eventual cost of soldier settlement, warning the government's plans were likely to cost as much as the recent war.⁴⁹

Minister Hayes assured parliament that although the government was still purchasing orchards he had "given instructions not to settle on them any but really suitable men."⁵⁰ Such an assurance did little to allay the fears of many. Frederick Burbury was another who feared the consequences of the government's present policy. Burbury claimed that "a great number of people are of the opinion that too much money had been spent for some of the land intended for soldier settlement"⁵¹ and that "his experience was that nine out of ten who went to the Government and offered land for sale were themselves not doing well. They often wanted to unload their properties and seized upon the idea of shoving it onto the Government."⁵²

Others believed the government to be dilatory in the matter of resettlement. In December, at a welcome home function at Franklin, Councillor Cuthbert attacked the state government over the tardiness of its dealings with the returned men. Cuthbert claimed that the

⁴⁸ Lake, *A Divided Society*, p101.

⁴⁹ *Huon Times*, November 29 1918.

⁵⁰ *Mercury*, August 1 1918.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

government was far too prepared to allow highly paid public servants, rather than practical men, to oversee the scheme. He claimed that all the public servants did was to send circulars to the local valuation committees and let them do all the work, and complained that "if this is the best that the government officials can do for those men who have saved this country from succumbing to the power of Germany it is time to throw up their jobs and let the matter be controlled by men of more business like instincts."⁵³

The Board defended itself against such criticism by claiming that the speedy demobilisation of soldiers had stretched its resources to the limit. As the Board noted in its official report, "with the signing of the Armistice and the consequent demobilisation of the troops, and their rapid return to the State, necessity arose for greater expedition in the purchase of suitable properties and settlement of the men."⁵⁴ It will be remembered that state governments had feared just this situation at the repatriation conferences of 1915-16.

The Board also informed Parliament of its difficulties when trying to purchase suitable properties. Owners were often either reluctant to sell or inclined to seek exorbitant prices. To provide the soldiers with greater access to more suitable properties the Board asked Parliament to strengthen the compulsory clauses of the Resettlement Act. Given the antagonism of many parliamentarians towards compulsory purchase in 1917, there was little doubt of the response.

The Board was concerned to purchase properties at a reasonable price; it had early realised that if property prices were too high many soldiers would be unable to meet their obligations. Then the government would face the possibility of being left with many properties that could only be disposed of at a loss. As the Board reported: "it was essential to always bear in mind the necessity for estates being acquired at prices as will allow of prospective settlers meeting their obligations to the Crown and obtaining a fair living from their holdings."⁵⁵

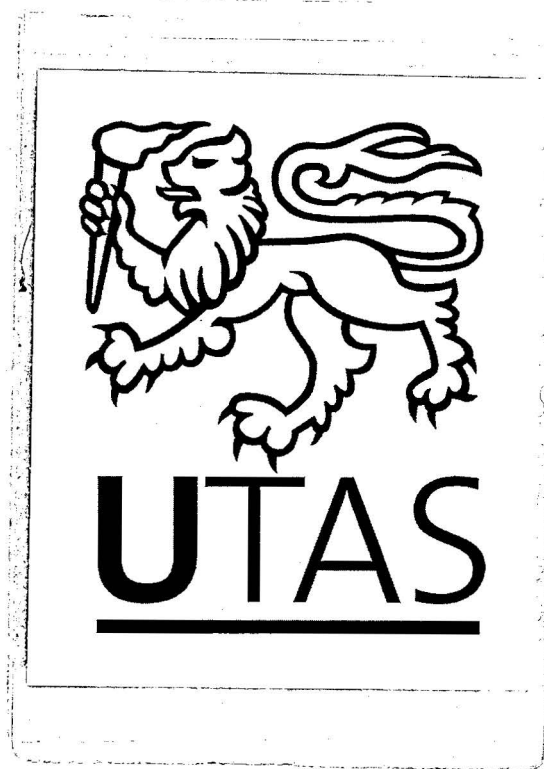
From the inception of the scheme there had always been a nervousness in government circles as to purchase of orchard properties. The Board's report for 1918-1919 reinforced this concern: "It will be readily

⁵³ *Huon Times*, December 1 1918.

⁵⁴ Closer Settlement Board Report for 1918-19, T. J. P. P., Volume LXXXI, 1919-20, Paper No 22.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

understood that orchards and fruit farms suffer most from inattention and neglect of lessees, and it is most essential that only the right class of men with experience shall be placed on properties of this description."⁵⁶ The Board had already experienced losses on such properties, though it claimed these to be merely the result of the industry's temporary difficulties. The report was optimistic that the fruit industry would soon revive and the soldier settlers make good. Such optimism was not shared by many Huon orchardists. They were convinced the coming season would be the most difficult they had yet experienced.



⁵⁶ *ibid.*

Chapter Five.

A Context of continuing difficulty: 1919-1925.

For the people of the Huon, indeed for all Tasmanians, the end of hostilities in Europe held promise of a return to pre-war economic prosperity and the hope that trade links with England, severed in the war years, would soon be renewed. This was not to be. Lloyd Robson in writing of this period referred to it as "A Dismal Decade".¹ The orchardist in this period was to find himself suffering under what seemed to be an endless litany of economic reversals. A lack of shipping due to German submarine action in the war, British import and price controls, the operations of the Navigation Act and the Australian tariffs, the lack of co-operation amongst growers, growing union militancy and the general economic downturn at the end of the war all made the grower's job a difficult one. As well, many growers became increasingly convinced that they were the victims of a Hobart based cartel of businessmen whose aim was the complete control and manipulation of the orcharding industry.

Any relief that orchardists might have hoped to gain from State and Federal Governments was lost in the general financial difficulties of the post-war years. The cost of the war had already been paid for in lives - now came the time of financial reckoning. Tasmania's economy, fragile and dependent on overseas and interstate markets, was severely affected by this accrued war debt. Tasmania was to enter into a period of deep recession. In an effort to balance the State's finances the Lee Nationalist Government instituted a regime of severe economic controls that in turn created an unstable, perhaps atrophied, political system. For the Huon, so dependent upon one marketable export in its orchards, the period was to prove especially difficult.

These already real pressures were to be exacerbated by increasingly difficult and protracted antagonisms between employer and employees, especially evident in the timber industry. There was to be an intensification of class antagonisms, already evident during the conscription referendums of 1916 and 1917. The economic downturn in the Huon led to a significant exodus of population from the area. Any

¹ Robson, *A History of Tasmania: Vol 11.*, p423.

hopes of local economic development, hopes so strongly held in the pre-war years, would be crushed in these early years of the 1920s.

But perhaps no group in the Huon would have their spirits crushed so completely as the soldier settlers. All those promises of a better future, of a land fit for heroes, would come to nought in such difficult times. While their experiences will be described in some detail elsewhere they necessarily play a role in this particular story as their fates were so inextricably involved in the general suffering of the Huon at this time.

Initially 1919 offered the hope of a better year for the growers. The orchards hung heavy with fruit and the evaporating plants were readying themselves for a busy season. Now that the war had ended there was the strong conviction that shipping would return to normal and there would be no repeat of what had been a disastrous 1918 season. Any optimism about the 1919 season was cut short though when the English Controller of Food, in an attempt to protect England's war strained economy, established price controls over imported food-stuffs.^{1A} Tasmanian orchardists were allowed a maximum selling price of 19s 9d. Worse still, growers would be expected to pay landing charges of 11s on each case. The *Huon Times* considered that any attempt to export fruit now would be a venture that had "the appearance of a gamble with loaded dice."²

With the backing of the Federal Government the growers decided that the only way to protect their interests was to form themselves into an apple pool. It was believed that the orderly marketing of fruit promised the only hope for reasonable returns. The plan to form an apple pool also received support from Tasmania's biggest shipper, Henry Jones.³ Jones suggested to the growers that controlling the marketing of apples at one end gave some security of a reasonable return but suggested that a similar syndicate should be formed at the English end so that the growers would have a greater control over the retail of fruit in England.⁴ Controlling the market at both ends would give the best possible advantage to the growers and help curb, if not break, the retail monopoly

² *Huon Times*, February 14 1919.

³ Bruce Brown's, *I Excel: The Life and Times of Sir Henry Jones*, (Hobart 1991) characterises Jones in an essentially benevolent light. This thesis would argue Jones to have been mainly motivated by self-interest.

⁴ *Huon Times*, March 4 1919.

that had for so long been in the hands of the importers. This decision by Henry Jones to back the pool eased the pressure that had been placed on the Federal Government which now withdrew.

But the loss of possible Federal assistance to growers no doubt suited Jones's purposes. After all, the Commonwealth government's promised assistance to growers had posed a direct threat to that cosy monopoly he had long held in the Huon. But the possible intrusion of government was not the only threat to Jones's monopoly. There had always been the bigger threat that growers might themselves organise into co-operatives - and at his expense. To this end, both before and during the war, he had attempted to create co-operatives of his own but his efforts had always been met with strong resistance from most growers. Such resistance is understandable when one considers that the proposed leaders of these co-operatives were to be none other than known associates of Jones. Indeed most growers were only too aware there could be no possibility of independence when men such as T. A. Frankcomb, C. S. Marsh and George Shield were involved. That these men had been instrumental in the construction of a cool store at Cygnet in 1917 and Huonville in 1919 only reinforced the fears of most growers. As well Jones's penchant for creating small but competing businesses to manipulate the price of fruit was widely recognised by Huon growers, many of whom had suffered from such machinations on Jones's part.

Jones's fear of independent co-operatives was finally realised in 1918 when a number of growers in the Huon organised themselves into the Port Huon Fruitgrowers Co-operative. (P. H. F. C.) This organisation, based at Geeveston, was composed largely of small growers who had combined to protect themselves against the Hobart based shippers and the larger orchardists, rumoured to be in league with the shippers. Starting in January 1919 the P. H. F. C. already had a packing shed at Geeveston and had organised a shipment of 25 000 cases at which appeared to many to be the remarkable price of 6s 6d a case. In contrast Jones and the other Hobart shippers had offered 6s a case - less 3d a case cartage. Clearly the P. H. F. C. threatened the Hobart based shipper's monopoly. The *Huon Times* was a ready supporter of the P. H. F. C. arguing it gave the Huon the chance to achieve its long yearned for independence.

The animosity of the P. H. F. C. towards Henry Jones soon became obvious. The Manager of the P. H. F. C., J. J. Kennealy, accused Jones of

having "submarined" the Tasmanian growers with his plan to establish a syndicate of English importers to "protect" the Tasmanian growers' interests.⁵ Kennealy claimed a member of Jones' London syndicate to be a company registered in Hobart and that a deal had been struck between the London syndicate and Hobart shippers. With this announcement the *Huon Times* lamented it, "was now a matter of pure chance as to the fate of subsequent shipments, in which the fruit grower stood to lose and had very little chance of coming out on top."⁶

By April it was clear there were too few ships to carry the crop. 100,000 cases were being delivered to the wharf in Hobart each week but there was space on board the boats for only 23,000 cases every three weeks. Fruit had to be left on the open wharf as the surplus could not be stored in the overflowing cool stores. It was now necessary to dump fruit on the interstate market which offered poor returns. Jones and the other shippers were only prepared to offer the growers 4s 6d a case. The price was a dangerous one for the grower.

To compound the growers' problems much of the fruit left on the Hobart wharf was damaged by poor handling and inclement weather. This had usually been sold to the drying factories, factories owned by men such as Henry Jones. Although never paying much it at least offered the growers some return. In the middle of April the drying factories announced that they would only offer a top price of 1s 6d a bushel for fruit. The offer proved disastrous. The *Huon Times* was convinced the growers had reached their nadir. "During the past few years the fruitgrowers have been having a bad time and this year the climax has about been reached - for if there is any worse to come then Heaven help the orchardist for he would be incapable of helping himself."⁷

Spurred on by the actions of the drying factories the Manager of the P. H. F. C., now R. H. Thompson, announced they would establish their own drying factories to break the "octopus power" of the Hobart middlemen. Thompson claimed that only the larger growers could now expect anything like an income from the season and that the average grower could only expect a return equal to one pound a week for his labours. Thompson drew the ready comparison between this income and

⁵ *ibid.*, March 18 1919.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, April 29 1919.

that of an average worker who received from 8 - 10s a day. No doubt many growers, after such a season, were convinced of the need to join together into co-operatives to protect their interests. Many of these were small growers attempting to eke out an existence on small orchards dotted around the Huon. In 1919 their numbers were being swelled by many of those men who had returned from the war and Thompson viewed the P. H. F. C. as an organisation that could provide them with a measure of protection against the fruit industry's monopolists. "Our boys went to the war to fight for Australia, liberty and the right to live in civilised comfort and security. Is it right that our boys should come back to us to face starvation."⁸

The orchardist was not the only sufferer in these years. The end of the war had seen a rapid increase in the cost of living and just as the orchardist sought hope in co-operation so the unionist sought salvation in an increased solidarity and a push for better working conditions and increased wages. In early 1919 the Australian Workers Union had taken a new log of claims for orchard hands to the federal Arbitration Court. After the failure of the last season the A. W. U's log of claims posed a real threat to many growers who now organised themselves into a branch of the Farmers, Stockowners and Orchardists Association and pledged themselves to find money for a defence fund. The A. W. U's claims were seen by many orchardists as an example of the increasingly Bolshevik attitude of the Australian worker. It was also seen as an attack upon the returned soldiers. V. W. Shoobridge, a prominent figure in the Farmers, Stockowners and Orchardists Association, told a meeting of growers at Franklin that "it was very evident that growers could not afford to pay the abnormally high rates of wages demanded through the A. W. U. which also wanted ... preference to unionists. That meant that a man who had been to the war...who was not a member of the union, was to be debarred from employment"⁹

Later events at Geeveston would show such comments to be not entirely without foundation. The early 1920s were marked by intense union agitation. Many unionists believed their principles to easily outweigh any claim by returned men for special treatment. Indeed, there were many in the union movement who believed the returned men to be

⁸ *ibid.*, May 6 1919.

⁹ *ibid.*, February 4 1919.

the worker's enemy. After all, if, as they believed, the war had been essentially fueled by the idea of capitalist expansion then the returned men had been willing agents of capitalism itself. In a sense, it might be argued, the returned men who had volunteered to fight on the Western Front would now be conscripted to fight on the industrial front. While motivated by different ideals, both Thompson and Shoobridge found common cause and purpose in recruiting the returned men to their cause.

Many of the men were indeed in need of some protection as they, like others, were finding it increasingly difficult to find employment in a recession - bound Tasmania. To help relieve unemployment amongst the returned soldiers the State Government in March provided special funding to local councils.^{9A} The Huon Council received a grant of £406 under the scheme and employed men on the beautification of Regatta Point, the upgrading of local roads and the clearance of blackberries. The Government's decision to restrict the use of the money to unemployed soldiers only irritated the *Huon Times* which argued many of the soldiers who had taken up properties in the area would have found the extra income from the scheme most useful. The present apple season being such a disaster the extra money could have made a big difference to their futures. There was unhappiness amongst many of the men who were in receipt of the grant. Those working at Geeveston claimed that after paying 25s a week for their accommodation, there was little if any left on which to live. There was one bright hope. After a two year closure it was rumoured that the Huon Timber Company at Geeveston was soon to reopen.

The Government's aid to the unemployed soldiers in the Huon illustrated the growing concern held for these men. In July there were complaints from the Soldier Fathers Association about unfair treatment by Councils which did not give preference to returned men when employing new staff. As well, the Association was convinced that the Local Council Advisory Boards, established to help the Government in the resettlement of the returned men, were merely frustrating the desires of soldiers who wished to settle on properties of their choice. It was felt these Boards were creating serious delays in resettlement. In September the local Doyer correspondent for the *Huon Times* complained "nothing is being done locally to help our returned warriors

desirous of settling in our flourishing community."¹⁰ The resettlement of some men carried an occasionally ominous note. The purchase of a property at Strathblane by one returned man, W. Seabourne, drew the following comment from the local correspondent: "It is hoped that he will have luck with it as no one so far seems to have been able to make a success of it."¹¹ Seabourne, wounded in the war, was dead within the year. His father, allowed to take over the property, surrendered it in 1922.¹²

The difficulties faced by both the orchardists and the returned men was exacerbated by the sharp rise in inflation at the end of the war. The State election of 1919 had been largely fought over the issue of which party was best able to control the state's worsening financial situation. While the Nationalists under Sir Walter Lee were returned to office, there was dissension within the party over the proper course of economic policy. Such dissension created instability within government and Lee's Ministry soon showed marked signs of indecision.¹³

In early October the Lee Nationalists, in an attempt to control inflation, introduced an anti-profiteering Bill into Parliament. Even the Premier publicly expressed a lack of confidence in the Bill's ability to control inflation. The rapid cost rises in soldier settlement underlined the Government's difficulties. The *Huon Times* too was not overly optimistic, noting "the public is feeling very keenly the pinch of higher prices, and looked to Parliament to do something towards checking the cruel but wiley and elusive profiteer"¹⁴ and offered cynical consolation when it pointed out that those public servants, employed to oversee Lee's legislation, would probably receive the greatest benefit.

These post-war difficulties created a tense climate, well displayed in the outbreak of sectarian difference that occurred in the Huon in 1919. During the arguments over conscription in 1916 and 1917 there was no evidence, at least publicly, of any sectarian division or difficulty within the area. The troubles in Ireland, however, seem to have

¹⁰ *ibid.*, September 19 1919.

¹¹ *ibid.*, July 22 1919.

¹² AB 19/848.

¹³ Dicker's election results were most impressive. He easily topped the poll in Franklin.

¹⁴ *Huon Times*, October 3 1919.

radicalised many in the Catholic community, especially at Cygnet. On Peace Day 1919 the local Cygnet doctor and avid conscriptionist, G. Wade, complained of the failure of the Catholic Church to fly the Union Jack. Wade claimed "the nakedness of this pole was a direct insult to our returned men, and was regarded by them as such."¹⁵ But the pole was far from "naked".

The Catholic Church had, in celebration of Peace Day, organised a Queen Carnival and their flags flew that day. The green of the Queen of Erin had flown at the masthead while the red, white and blue of the Queen of Peace took bottom position. No doubt this was the real cause of Wade's difficulty. One returned man, Clem Lawler, approached the local Catholic priest, Father P. J. O'Flynn, and asked him to fly the flag of the Queen of Peace at the masthead for the day but O'Flynn refused to do so. He did though offer to fly an Australian flag but when Lawler returned with the Union Jack O'Flynn refused to fly it until "justice is done to my people and country."¹⁶

When O'Flynn addressed his congregation a few days later to defend his actions he did so in Gaelic. He told the congregation that the positions of the flags in no way represented disloyalty to Australia but had merely reflected the relative positions of the Queens at that time. The request to fly the Union Jack had been an insult to both himself and his people - the Irish. Having just returned from Ireland he had seen first hand the operations of the Black and Tans and it had left him with nothing but bitter hatred for the English and their flag. His spirited defence met with applause from his congregation.

There was further sectarian strife in October when, in expectation of the then world wide influenza epidemic reaching Cygnet, O'Flynn asked Dr. Ingram from the Health Department to visit the Huon. Some on the Cygnet Council, responsible for matters of local health, saw effrontery in O'Flynn's move. O'Flynn saw it differently and claimed that he "would not be doing (his) duty as a Catholic Priest if (he) stood by and saw (his) people dying all around...and did not make an effort to save them."¹⁷ O'Flynn also managed to obtain the services of a nurse

¹⁵ *ibid.*, August 8 1919.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, August 15 1919.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, October 7 1919.

from Hobart but the Council demanded her immediate return. O'Flynn suggested the Council's decision to be motivated by sectarian interests and suggested the nurse had been ordered back to Hobart "because she had been trained at St Vincent's Hospital."¹⁸ The Council claimed its actions to be motivated not by sectarian but by financial reasons. This is possible, but many saw sectarianism behind the Council's decision.

For the people of the Huon the recent outbreak of peace in Europe was bittersweet: the promised benefits were but a tantalising dream. The post-war world had shown itself to be a hard and dangerous place. These sentiments were neatly encapsulated in a piece of verse from one local orchardist.

An Orchardist's Troubles

*As I walked out the other night,
I met poor Smith in sorry plight.
He's mighty dense who failed to trace,
Dejection written on his face.
Why Smith, said I, prop up your jaw,
It never looked so low before.
Be careful or it will soon rest,
Right down upon your blooming chest.
Cheer up old boy you're giving way,
The sun will shine another day.
But Smith he only shook his head,
And with disconsolation said,
I've got no use for wiley Watt,¹⁹
He'd let our pears and apples rot.
Instead of helping pull us through,
By sending just a ship or two,
The Government is seems to me,
Gives nothing else but sympathy.
Of growing fruit I'm mighty sick,
No wonder men turn Bolshevick.
Wherever, he said, I look around,
The fruit lies rotting on the ground.
Another thing we've got to face,
It's mighty hard to get a case.
With freights and labour on the rise,
Expenses mount up to the skies.
It seems to me it's all alike,
We've got to pay for every strike.
Whenever there's trouble at the mill,
The growers have to foot the bill.
The same upon the wharf applies,
Whenever lumpers want a rise.
You're going to hear a sorry tale,
Why every place must be for sale.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ W. A. Watt was acting Prime Minister, Hughes being overseas in 1918-1919.

*Unless we get the ships supplied,
To carry fruit the other side.
So after bidding him good night,
I knew that what he said was right.
I felt that every word was true,
With shipping troubles, strikes and flu:
And everything so dreadful dear,
It meant for Smith a wretched year.²⁰*

If for most growers the 1919 season had been disastrous the coming season offered little comfort. It began with news that the British Board of Trade had allocated space for only 400,000 cases but, after vigorous protest from both the growers and the Federal Government, the figure was doubled. An allowance of 800,000 cases was still regarded as insufficient. The season had been a particularly good one and the growers had been hoping to see 1,000,000 cases reach the English market. There was consensus that unless they were able to ship 1 000 000 cases the season would prove unprofitable. The low returns received on fruit, the high cost of freight, the increasingly difficult shipping conditions and the wages push by the A. W. U. left many growers desperate.

As the *Huon Times* commented, "we rely absolutely on the English fruit shipment to relieve the local markets during the earlier part of the season and if this is not up to the requirement the result is bound to be heavy shipments to local markets and a consequent dropping of prices to a figure that will barely pay for the trouble of sending forward the fruit."²¹ The situation was an especially difficult one as many growers, due to the preceding series of bad seasons, had next to no cash reserves and merely lived from season to season, the returns from one financing the next. Many too found themselves increasingly at the mercy of Hobart - based financiers led by Henry Jones.

To help alleviate the situation many growers, especially those associated with the P. H. F. C., looked to a political solution and called for the formation of a Tasmanian Party to represent their interests in Parliament. It was felt that representation in Federal and State Parliaments would give growers greater control over the allocation of shipping space and, with tariff revues in the offing, promise Tasmania and themselves an improved financial deal from the Commonwealth.

²⁰ *Huon Times*, April 25 1919.

²¹ *ibid.*, January 6 1920.

The announcement of these new tariffs in April shocked the growers. There was yet again the feeling that the politicians had no interest in their welfare. The increase in the tariff on sugar was especially disappointing. For the grower it represented the triumph of the urban middlemen and the manufacturers over the rural sector. The *Huon Times* saw the new tariffs as "a monstrous additional burden imposed upon all engaged in rural industry so that overgrown cities may become more inflated still."²² It was also believed the tariff system had inspired much of the damaging industrial action that had so bedevilled the orchardists. Higher tariffs led to a rise in the price of essential goods, in turn forcing workers to seek higher wages. In the end the long suffering orchardists were expected to pay the price and they felt their only hope lay in breaking the nexus between higher tariffs and wage demands.

Direct parliamentary representation may have been a viable long term solution to the growers' problems but the situation in early 1920 necessitated an immediate solution. As in 1919, the growers believed their salvation lay in the formation of an apple pool. With English importers offering only 5s a case and growers faced with a shipping bill of 7s 7 ¹/₂d a case the situation seemed bleak.

In January, Jones yet again announced his preparedness to finance a pool which promised a better return than that offered by English importers.^{22A} Significantly Jones' plan meant the growers would have to accept responsibility for any losses or gains on the sale of the fruit, an important change to the operating procedure of the 1919 pool in which the purchasing syndicate accepted such risk. Initially the P. H. F. C. made no public comment about the Jones' plan then in February announced its intention to purchase fruit at 7s 6d a case. Immediately Jones dropped his plans for a fruit pool, now offering growers a price of 6s a case fruit on board.

Such actions immediately brought accusations of underhanded dealings from the executive of the Central Fruit Committee which believed Jones' intentions from the beginning to be the monopolisation of the 1920 crop. From various quarters there were calls for a Royal Commission and the *Huon Times* assured its readers that if such a Commission were held then we "would hear some funny things then."²³

²² *ibid.*, June 11 1920.

²³ *ibid.*, April 16 1920.

It was not just the prices offered for the fruit that interested many. The way in which space on the boats was allocated was seen to be the chief evil of the present system. There was the widely held feeling that Jones and other shippers manipulated the allocation of space to suit their own interests to the detriment of smaller growers. Such feeling was evidenced by Councillor Cripps at a meeting of the Kingborough Council when he suggested that:

to his mind it was all nonsense to say that the Government, so called, governed Australia. She was governed by certain speculators and entirely in their own interests. While a mean could get all the space he wanted because he dealt with the right firms another man got put off with four or five cases a boat. The whole thing was nothing but a swindle from end to end.²⁴

Although some growers received a reasonable income from the 1920 season many received little - in some cases no return - on their fruit. It was not uncommon for some orchardists to find themselves owing money at the end of the season.²⁵ It is not surprising that many growers now became more convinced their only hope for survival lay in cooperation. After all, it was the P. H. F. C. that had forced Jones' hand in 1920.

When in June orchardists met in Hobart to prepare for the 1921 season they did so in optimistic belief that organisation would lead them to a more secure future.^{25A} If organised they could overcome those forces which had so long ensured their failure. J. P. Piggott, Chairman of the P. H. F. C., told the meeting it needed to get behind his movement, a movement which now packed and exported 40% to 50% of the State's crop. Such a decision by the "disorganised growers", when joined to the high packing standards and professional approach of the P. H. F. C., would ensure the best possible chance of success.^{25B} There was a discernible feeling amongst many growers that conditions were on the improve and the bad times were nearly at an end. This feeling was

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to gain any accurate figures on the fruit returns, even though such figures were published. Published reports in the *Huon Times*, anecdotal evidence and figures contained in soldier settler files would suggest many orchardists were in dire financial straits at the end of the season.

underlined by the recent establishment of a State shipping line which promised a reduction in freight charges and by news that English price controls would soon be lifted. The continuing drought on the mainland held promise of a revitalised interstate market. The cost of box timber and wrapping paper was increasing and there was as yet no resolution of the vexed problem of the allocation of shipping space, but it was felt that with cooperation the growers would be able to exert some measure of control over the cost increases and so force the shipping agents to provide a more equitable allocation of shipping space.

In the Huon the renewed optimism found voice especially amongst the boosters on the local councils. The State Government had reopened its inquiry into the Huon railway and work continued on the reclamation works at Franklin. There were promised extensions to the wharf at Port Huon and the government and local Councils were close to an agreement over the provision of hydro-electric power to the area. It was rumoured too that many of the timber mills, especially the Huon Timber Company, would soon reopen so relieving the problem of unemployment. There was even the possibility that new industries, such as gold mining at Cygnet, could be started which promised a more diverse and sound economic base for the area.

The boosters had not reckoned with higher inflation and even lower fruit prices. In August the *Huon Times* bleakly noted that "the position is daily becoming more acute, hardship is becoming strikingly more apparent."²⁶ In the previous twelve months the local Repatriation Committee alone had been forced to distribute £1 529 to 67 men, £1 400 of which had been spent on the unemployed, the medically unfit and the soldier settlers. Optimism, no matter how guarded, might give hope but it failed to feed and clothe the hungry.

November saw a reappearance of sectarian difficulties. In a letter to the *Mercury*²⁷ "Absolutely Disgusted" accused the Catholic Church at Cygnet of having sent some of the funds raised in the 1919 Princess Carnival to the Sinn Fein in Ireland for use in propaganda purposes. In his sermon the following week Father O'Flynn denied the charge, claiming the money had been used to pay off the Church debt at the local Commercial Bank and to help in the education of local Catholic youth.

²⁶ *Huon Times*, August 13 1920.

²⁷ Letter referred to in the *Huon Times* of November 16 1920.

To applause, O'Flynn told his congregation:

in England..dogs sometimes suffered from the disease hydrophobia. When stricken with the disease they went mad and were very dangerous. In Hobart there was a kennel where the virus of this disease was cultivated and the poison was sent broadcast. Who was safe from it? ...all must be on their guard especially should their names be Irish ones such as Meagher, Cullen, Mahon, Mannix, McSweeny or Barry against the bite of the dog.²⁸

After the collapse of the planned apple pool for 1921,^{28A} growers were left to make their own arrangements. Those who shipped with the cooperatives, such as the P. H. F. C., received some measure of protection but those who didn't were left to the mercy of the middlemen in Hobart. Yet again there were accusations that these middlemen allocated space on the boats to suit their own purposes. Rumour insisted that the bigger growers, in collusion with Henry Jones and his agent Everard Ross, the General Secretary of the Tasmanian branch of the Overseas Committee²⁹, received preferential treatment. Indeed, as early as August 1920 Albert Ogilvie, Labor Member for Franklin, had asked the Minister for Agriculture, J. B. Hayes, whether he was "aware that it was freely alleged through the country that Henry Jones and Co Ltd unfairly discriminated in favour of certain orchards and/or speculators in such allotments."³⁰ Hayes denied all knowledge of such practices though it was an answer that convinced few. In February 1921 a meeting of the P. H. F. C. was told that Henry Jones and the other middlemen had, at the direct expense of orchardists, made £120 000 in the 1920 season alone. Such information, it was claimed, came from sources close to the English markets.

In February Jones and Co. announced that due to the drop in demand from overseas markets it was to close its canning factories. The decision immediately threatened the employment of some two to 300 workers and effectively ended what had been an important outlet for

²⁸ *Huon Times*, November 16 1920.

²⁹ The Overseas Committee, essentially a private agency, oversaw the export of, and arranged shipping space for, Australia's primary exports. As such it was a most powerful, and consequently controversial, body.

³⁰ *Huon Times*, August 6 1920.

many struggling growers. There were immediate accusations that Jones and Co., having made such large profits in the war years, had now, at the slightest setback, decided to close its plants. The *Huon Times* for one



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had no difficulty in apportioning responsibility. "The blame for lost markets, both in London and the East, rests at the doors of the canning factories...careless labelling, faulty packing and sometimes the canning of fruit of indifferent quality are the grounds of complaint by the London buyers."³¹ The easy profits of the war years had led to slipshod methods and now it was the growers who were expected to pay the price. The announcement in late February that Jones and co had purchased a canning plant in California, a factory that had belonged to Jones's associate A. W. Palfreyman, did little to allay public antagonism towards Jones. It was just such increasing competition from American producers which had helped create the growers' present difficulty.

As if the closure of the canning factories was not a severe enough blow, news came that space could now only be guaranteed for 670,000 cases and that freight was still to be paid at the high 8s a case. Henry Jones offered little joy when he remarked "the growers could not pay 8s freight

³¹ *ibid.*, February 15 1921.

and get a living out of their shipment."³² When in March the S. S. Port Denison suffered fire damage and the S. S. Northumberland found itself strike bound in New Zealand growers knew the season held all the portents of disaster. They would now be unable to ship their first export crops until April and their lucrative early markets had been lost. English buyers now realising the Tasmanian fruit would have to compete with that from South Africa and America, decided against advancing the cost of freight. Already many Covent Garden buyers were offering a mere 8s a case for fruit. In April growers learned that space for their fruit was to be further reduced to 580 000 cases. The situation, as growers knew, had its irony: if they had been able to get their early fruit away then this new reduction in space would have pushed the price of fruit to excellent levels. Now only the larger growers could possibly sustain the expected losses on the season. Most small growers would be left with little - many would find themselves in debt. A mere 400 000 cases of what could have been a 1 000 000 eventually reached the English markets.³³

The poor returns the majority of orchardists received for their 1921 shipment did not abate the A. W. U's push for improved wages for orchard workers. The growers were adamant that any increase in wages from the then 9s or 10s a day spelt disaster for the industry. But while the orchardists prepared to fight a Federal push for wage increases there was an equally ominous development closer to home when the State Wages Board decided to grant local council roadworkers an extra 2s a week. The Huonville and Cygnet Councils immediately rejected the decision. Councillor Harrison from Cygnet warned the "wage of fourteen shillings a day for roadmen potentially fixed a similar wage for orchard hands and every other worker in the district. Cygnet district could not stand such a wage which might be alright in a timber getting or mining district, but was far too high for a fruit growing or farming district which could not pay such high wages."³⁴ Some believe workers already received a very good wage. Councillor Norris from Cygnet complained "some of these men took their family to a picture shoe every week. The orchardists could not afford it."³⁵ Both Norris and Harris received little

³² *ibid.*, February 18 1921.

³³ Figures taken from the *Huon Times*, March 4 1921.

³⁴ *ibid.*, January 22 1921.

³⁵ *ibid.*, August 9 1921.

comfort when Claud Coad, one of the "affluent" workers, wrote to the *Huon Times* claiming the Council only wanted to put its "boot on the worker's head."³⁶ Coad claimed that "due to his low wages he and his family were at that time compelled to, "sleep under bags...poverty is no disgrace, but it's very inconvenient."³⁷ With local landlords such as Harvey and Harrison asking anything from 12s to one pound a week rent the extra 2s would no doubt have been a great help to men such as Coad. As he noted in his letter "these two gentlemen will not knock anything off the rent although so keen to cut down the wages."³⁸

Within weeks Cygnet Warden, Robert Harvey, informed Council that a professional agitator and not Coad had written the letter and Coad now regretted his role in the matter. True or otherwise, Harvey's claims underlined the real fear many Huon employers held - the entry of any union, and especially the A. W. U., into what had been until recently the closed world of the Huon. It was a world in which the worker had traditionally known his place. The lines of social division had been clearly drawn. In an attempt to circumvent the decision of the State Wages Board the Cygnet Council decided not to employ anyone known to be an A. W. U. member. As Councillor Harrison argued "if these men are not employed they will get out of the union quick and lively. By boycotting them before they get a hold in the district we shall prevent them getting a hold."³⁹

Local councils and orchardists were not the only recipients of union attention. The recently reopened Huon Timber Company at Geeveston soon found itself in dispute with the unions. When the mill was first reopened, in late 1920, there had been a dispute over the Company's request that employee continue working in wet weather. When the bushmen refused to comply with the request there had been sackings, but mill workers striking in sympathy had forced the company to relent.

In December 1920 there was further trouble when the company decided a recent Federal decision to award workers a 44 hour week excluded travelling time. Instead the company offered workers an extra pound a week if they worked a full 44 hours in the bush. Somewhat

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*, May 25 1921.

reluctantly the workers agreed to the offer but in February the issue of travelling time yet again became a matter of dispute. To overcome the difficulty of travel to and from the increasingly remote stands of timber, the company planned to erect huts so workers might spend the week in the bush close to the work site. The workers were advised by union representatives to reject the plan. Melbourne Timber Union Workers representative, A. McDonald, quoting Joe Hill, told the workers to stand firm on the issue. If they did, he suggested, the time would soon come when for every 20s they produced the worker would receive a pound in wages. The *Huon Times*, in reporting the completion of the huts, underplayed union concerns and merely noted "for various reasons, financial and otherwise, the scheme meets with a great deal of opposition from the men concerned."⁴⁰ When, in early June, the workers discovered the company intended to charge them 21s a week rent for the privilege of working away from their families, they threatened strike action. They were too late. At the beginning of August the mill closed down throwing 120 men out of work. A small staff was kept to maintain the plant and machinery while the company made plans for the future.

The closure of the mill was seen by many to be the result of intransigent union demands but there were other, more worrying, difficulties.^{40A} Like the orchardists the mills now faced increasing competition from overseas suppliers, especially those with lower wage rates in south-east Asia. Many of the mills had failed to reafforest and now found themselves increasingly isolated from ready supplies of timber. At Southport bushmen were now only working a 20 hour week if travelling time was taken into consideration.

The closure of the Huon Timber Company mill and the increasingly difficult economic circumstances of the orchardists led to increased unemployment in the Huon. Traditionally rural workers had always found themselves near the poverty line - often paid more in kind than cash. The post-war economic crash now made their conditions near intolerable. Many now began to wonder why, given the present economic circumstances, one group in the community should receive what was felt to be favoured treatment. That group was of course the returned men. There were growing complaints about the continued fundraising in aid of

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, May 13 1921.

these men and many believed the time had come for help to be given to those who needed it, rather than those who claimed it as a patriotic right. C. L. Tanner, Secretary of the Huon Branch of the Returned Servicemens League, defended his members against such charges, reminding the community that during the recent war "nothing was too good for the men who enlisted. And those poor soft-hearted creatures were soft enough to believe they were going to get all that was promised. What a disappointment when they returned."⁴¹

Many of the unemployed felt they had good reason to complain of the benefits the returned men received. The unemployment grant of 1919 to Huon Councils had been restricted to the returned men who were also often in receipt of special pensions and special funding from the Repatriation Department and its local committees. Many of them had been assisted onto properties, paid no rates and, in their Returned Servicemens League, had a powerful and emotive voice to push their case. Despite these seeming advantages, the reality was that the majority of the returned men were suffering too - those on the land perhaps more than most.

To add to these growing tensions the Catholic Church now embroiled itself in further controversy. In April Dr Barry, Catholic Coadjutor Archbishop of Tasmania, addressed the Catholic community at Cygnet on what he believed were the English injustices in Ireland. Had not 45 000 Irishmen fought for the English in the war, asked Barry, and now those who had survived were betrayed by the very Government they had fought for. Barry argued that when the English betrayed these men "they betrayed also the men whose names are on your roll of honour"⁴² He told his audience each Black and Tan made at least £200 a week in this plunder of Ireland. Barry was ably supported in such claims by Father Murphey who proudly declared all Catholics in Cygnet to be "Sinn Feiners to the back bone and the spinal marrow."⁴³ The *Huon Times* felt compelled to admonish both Barry and Murphey for what it described as their "intemperate" attacks on the English Government. No doubt many orchardists, given their recent treatment at the hands of the English Government, stood in silent support of the

⁴¹ *ibid.*, June 10 1921.

⁴² *ibid.*, April 26 1921.

⁴³

two priests.

Towards the end of the year the growers readied themselves for the coming season. The State election of 1922 offered the chance, through the P. H. F. C., to make real their long time threat to seek direct representation in Parliament. There was a feeling abroad that "the system of co-operation should be extended to politics."⁴⁴ Most farmers believed Parliament had only served the interests of the commercial sector and that the time had now arrived for such interest to be challenged. Many farmers had fallen under the influence of what they saw as the successful Farmers Party in New Zealand and sought to replicate such success in Tasmania. The *Huon Times* suggested the time was now right for such a move as "the balance of power between the two parties which now exists is so narrow as to make it possible for a third party to control both sides by using the one side or the other to secure everything that is necessary for their own protection and advancement."⁴⁵

In the election the P. H. F. C. endorsed two candidates in Franklin. They were to stand as representatives of the newly formed Country Party, an organisation founded on the mainland in January 1919 in reaction to what was believed to be Prime Minister Hughes's indifference to rural interests. The Country Party claimed the rural sector had for too long bolstered the city worker - the time had now arrived for the rural worker to receive due recognition for his labours. The candidates chosen to represent the interests of the P. H. F. C. were its then manager, J. P. Piggott and local orchardist B. J. Pearsall. These two were soon joined by former National Party member W. H. Dixon. At least publicly, the group stood as representatives of the smaller growers, opposed to what they considered the happy arrangement then existing between the larger orchardists, the Hobart shippers and the Lee Government. They were equally opposed to the two classes they believed dominant in the political system - the idle rich and the idle poor. The former they felt should be taxed and the latter punished.

The Country Party, while generally supportive of Federation, argued its disappointment to the primary producer. While Federation had initially promised a simpler system of Government and trade, it had

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, October 7 1921.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

in reality led to the proliferation of government departments and regulations, an iniquitous system of tariffs and the infamous Navigation Act⁴⁶, all of which worked against the interests of the orchardists. As well, the decision to establish a Federal award for wages in the Arbitration Court, had placed undue strain upon the already suffering primary producer. The awards granted by the Arbitration Court, so it was felt, were based upon urban, not rural conditions, and took no account of the conditions then applying in the rural sector. The time had come to make Federation work for the primary producer.

The Country Party was equally unhappy with the state Government, believing it had been only half-hearted in the promises it had made to the rural sector. Taxes were too high and the newly established State shipping line, whilst regarded as a positive step, still did not go far enough to be of real benefit to the orchardist. Like the Federal Arbitration Court the State Wages Board also posed a threat to the small farmer. The Party called for government assistance in the construction of cool stores and for government control of the Hydro Electric Department. Of especial interest to the Country Party was the construction of better roads in rural areas to help reduce the high cost of placing produce on the market. The Country Party's policies were well received in the Huon.

In December the P. H. F. C. opened its new pulping plant at Huonville. The 1 500 strong crowd attending the opening ceremony was enthusiastic as speaker after speaker outlined the potential benefits growers would receive if the co-operative system was extended to politics. The commercial success of the P. H. F. C. seemed to give the guarantee that political success must soon follow.^{46A}

Understandably the Country Party took special interest in the growing problems of soldier settlement. Pearsall was particularly critical of the Government's handling of the issue and complained that unless something was soon done to alleviate the difficulties in the scheme the State would find itself bankrupt. He warned that "a great deal of money would be lost in connection with it, because while many had been

⁴⁶ A Federal Act designed to protect the Australian Maritime industry but considered by successive Tasmanian Governments to have imposed an unfair tax burden upon the State. It was held to have increased the state's shipping costs and to have left Tasmania at the mercy of inter-state and overseas shippers.

successful, others should never have been put on the land because they knew nothing about it or existing conditions."⁴⁷ Dixon reminded the electors that, with the State debt now standing at £21 000 000, the issue had reached crisis point. He warned the scheme "would ultimately result in a loss to the State exchequer and provision would have to be made good for the loss."⁴⁸

The Labor Party too was strongly opposed to what it saw as the Government's incapacity to deal with the problem of soldier settlement. It also warned that the scheme must inevitably prove a burden on the State's finances unless the Federal Government could be forced to accept a greater responsibility. Not surprisingly the Government was rather more sanguine. The Minister then responsible for the scheme, Alex Hean, assured the electorate all monies so far spent had been wisely spent. He argued that the Government's expenditure on land had been a sound investment and that, although "the cost of the land purchases ...was two-hundred and fifty-thousand pounds..if it were sold again...would bring more than that amount."⁴⁹ Hean's claims reassured few. When the Ringarooma branch of the R. S. L. called upon the Government to revalue the property of soldier settlers⁵⁰ the Huon branches were quick to give support. The Huon Times was also extremely critical of the government's management of soldier settlement. In March the paper editorialised on Hean's failings. The paper noted:

he never was a brilliant man...and he had seen his best. Mr. Hean has not shown high skill in the purchase of farms for the settlement of the returned soldiers. The scheme of settlement too has been screamingly unscientific. Practical farmers were in many instances bought out at fancy prices and men of no experience put in their stead. Thus the basis of certain failure was laid. The crop will be reaped hereafter - when the incidental heartbreak has been sustained by those who will recognise that they cannot meet the accumulated pressure of higher interest on their holdings, with

⁴⁷ *Huon Times*, May 2 1922.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, May 12 1922.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, May 19 1922.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, May 12 1922.

dear labour and relatively low prices for product.⁵¹

The soldier settlers, unemployed or otherwise, had become a problem for the whole community.

The election result saw the return of the Lee Government, but only through the assistance of the Country Party. The Government and the Labor Party each held twelve seats, the Country Party five and Bass returned an independent, J. A. Jensen. Piggott was the lone Country Party representative for Franklin. He was soon to learn that holding the balance of power gave the right to frustrate but rarely to legislate. Perhaps the most surprising result in Franklin was the poor showing of David Dicker, who lost his seat. Dicker had run foul of the Timber Workers Union and the Tasmanian Trades and Labour Council and had been expelled from the Labor party. Running as an independent Laborite he had managed to gain only 750 votes, a poor contrast to the 3 600 votes gained in the last election. The fact that fewer than 50% of electors at Dover bothered to cast a vote was no doubt instrumental in Dicker's demise. Such a low vote led to calls for the introduction of compulsory voting.

If Piggott and his fellow country Party members were in any need of reassurance when urging a better deal for orchardists such assurance was ready to hand in the disastrous 1922 apple season. Yet again growers suffered a terrible year. In February "Spike Nail", in a letter to the *Huon Times*, put the position succinctly:

There were some fine crops down here last year, but I suppose it will be the agents who will benefit chiefly by this. The grower always comes out of the deal on the worst side. If the weather and pests (insects) don't beat him you can bet the shipping companies and the agents will. They take it turn and turn about.⁵²

As was now de rigueur, the season's initial prospects seemed promising. Initial overtures to the Federal Government to reduce the cost of transport were well received; there was the hope that the initial good prices of last season would hold firm and the news that some boats destined for the overseas trade were prepared to load at Port Huon. As well, a large number of steamers were ready to call at Port Huon for the interstate markets. The opening in January of a new P. H. F. C. packing

⁵¹ *ibid.*, March 3 1922.

⁵² *ibid.*, February 28 1922.

shed at Claremont also held the promise of a better season. In March the *Huon Times* spoke glowingly of the season's prospects: by April the glow had faded.



Loading Apples at the Hobart Wharves: early 1920s.

Difficulty continued over the allocation of space. Many growers had exceeded their quotas but due to the disorganization on the wharves it was impossible to determine who they were. To make matters worse the packaging of pears in non-standard cases had led to a waste of valuable space on the boats.

The first English shipment in the S. S. Moreton Bay proved a great disappointment. Picked early to catch the best prices, the fruit had arrived in an immature state. Within weeks a further fourteen boats had docked in England producing a glut on the market: over 1 000 000 cases arrived in the space of seven weeks. Due to problems with refrigeration much of this fruit had also arrived in poor condition. In general the fruit attracted only a low price of from 9s to 15s a case. In July F. W. Moore and Co Ltd, Jones' agent in London, wired that since their last report "prices have fallen, and at the end of last week more nearly approached pre-war levels, a disturbing fact, in view of existing high freight and charges."⁵³ In fact so much fruit had arrived on the market it had to be sold on the streets by the van load. As it had cost the grower some 13s to

⁵³ *ibid.*, July 4 1922.

14s a case⁵⁴ to place the fruit on the market the prospects were indeed bleak. The annual report of the P. H. F. C. described the season as a disastrous one - especially in relation to the difficulty of shipping the crop to market.

There were renewed calls for the Federal Government to intervene on the growers' behalf. South African growers, due to their government's subsidy, managed to ship their fruit at 1s 7d a case while Australian growers had been forced to pay 6s to 8s a case. Growers also believed there was a need for better distribution and marketing and suggested the Federal government help them to establish new Asian markets. The *Huon Times* strongly supported such a move because:

with every organisation upon which the grower is dependent for production of his apples bleeding him to the last drop he must surely realise now that if it is only to satisfy the demands of the shipping companies, the manure and spray merchants, the saw millers and his numerous other dependents it is up to him to make arrangements for ensuring better returns than he has been getting in the past.⁵⁵

In October E. F. Blyth, Minister for Lands and Mines, informed parliament of the concern the Government held for the fruit industry. He told Parliament of the "difficulty in some cases in collecting the interest due to the (Agricultural) Bank on loans which have been made to orchardists. Experience has shown that the orchardist's business is a much more hazardous one than that of an ordinary farmer, and the trustees are now very reluctant to lend State funds on this class of security."⁵⁶ Federally Prime Minister Hughes also voiced his concern at the plight of Australia's fruit industry. He promised a meeting of Victorian growers that he would see the cost of freight for the 1923 season reduced to 5s a case. Many of these growers were returned men and their presence provided special impetus to Hughes' effort. He told the meeting his government "was endeavouring to find new markets, and if we are successful it will mean that every penny and more of the twelve million or thirteen million pounds spent in settling soldiers on orchard

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, August 25 1922.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, October 17 1922.

⁵⁶ Ministerial Statement of the Minister for Lands and Mines, T. J. P. P., VolLXXXVII, 1922-23, Paper No.

lands will have been wasted."⁵⁷ The *Huon Times* pronounced itself unimpressed. The paper claimed there was "nothing heroic in Mr Hughes or any of the shipping companies bringing the freight down to five shillings this season. It is just double the pre-war rate and therefore must allow an enormous margin of profit."⁵⁸ The paper claimed shippers had made £168 000 in the 1922 season alone and suggested what was really needed was a reduction on the disastrously high tariff on sugar and the repeal of the Navigation Act. This, it was believed, would truly give Hughes heroic stature in the eyes of the growers. For his part Hughes seemed to be either incapable of, or unwilling to accept, the Huon Time's mantle of hero.

In August a meeting of the R. S. L. at Franklin discussed the plight of those members who had taken up orchards in the Huon. The recent season giving such low returns left most unable to pay expenses let alone interest on advances. The meeting resolved to approach Hughes for help, outlining their problems in a most detailed letter:

We desire to appeal to you to assist the large numbers of our members who have taken up fruitgrowing in the district. As you are probably aware orcharding is practically the sole industry of the Huon, and a very large proportion of its young men went to the war. On returning those in a position to do so secured orchards, and although they are quite satisfied that the prices paid were good values their experience of the past year has been almost disastrous for a great many of them. The principal cause of the failure to make good had bee the poor returns that are coming to hand from the English market, in several instances the soldiers actually receiving accounts for balances due to cover the costs of freight and commissions. There are well over a hundred members of our association engaged in fruit growing on their own account and on their behalf our association appeals to you, if possible, to secure a reduction in the freight on the overseas vessels and also to take steps to ensure the fruit being carried in a more satisfactory manner than it was done during the past season....

To give you some instance of the returns which are coming to hand lately, here are a few:- for 100 cases 5d in stamps: out of

⁵⁷ *Huon Times*, November 7 1922.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

another 100, 47 carted to the tip, 26 cases sold 6d each: in three successive shipments one soldier is 5 pounds in debt for freight and commission: numerous instances can be given of fruit only realising 1/6d per case or less. Even when the fruit is insured the average is said to be only 12/6d and from this 9s 6d will be deducted for freight, insurance etc leaving 3/- to pay for case material, cultivation, nails, paper, spraying etc. Another year with the costs as high as this and not one of us will be able to hold on to our properties.⁵⁹

When Hughes visited Hobart in December he met with a deputation from the Huon R. S. L. which asked for a reduction in freight costs from the promised 5s to 4s a case, and financial relief for embattled settlers. The deputation reinforced the desperation of many settlers by pointing out that in their last season they had only received an average 2s 6d a case for fruit. As had been the case in Victoria, Hughes was told that "unless some of the returned soldiers obtained relief next season either by a reduction of freight or a guarantee that their fruit would be landed in good condition they would be unable to carry on."⁶⁰ Although some confusion prevailed about Hughes' comments, it is clear he was unimpressed. He reputedly told the deputation:

you tell me it costs 14s 6d to sell a case of apples on the English market and if 2s 6d is your return, then you are losing 12s per case, so what is the good of the reduction of a shillingIf this is the state of the apple industry it would be better to sit like this (Mr Hughes folded his arms) or cut your orchards out and put the land to some other use. Why, it would be better to come catching butterflies with us. You know there is such a thing as putting a case too badly.⁶¹

Hughes said he had been reliably informed by the shippers that 5s was the lowest they could go before they themselves incurred a loss and he had to accept such advice. He did promise that if reelected he would ensure temperature controls were fitted to Commonwealth owned boats and that if extra funds were needed to help growers overcome their

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, August 11 1922.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, December 5 1922.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

present difficulties then his government would make them available "as it would be poor policy on the part of the Government not to assist the returned men...after so much had been spent, when a little more would tide them over this unsettled and troublesome period."⁶²

Hughes' promises rang hollow to the deputation. Even fellow Nationalists expressed disappointment. When the member for Franklin, Nationalist W. J. McWilliams, spoke in the Huon, he derided Hughes's sarcastic manner. McWilliams told his meetings that the price on fruit was set by English and not Australian interests and that all shipping lines should fly the skull and crossbones. If shippers dropped their charge on freight to 4s a case then more fruit could be sold bringing greater profits to all. The reality was, so he claimed, that a compromise would be reached and 4s 6d was the best growers could expect. "The war service homes and soldier settlement have proved positive tragedies - the entire state revenue would not meet this loss in ten years. And Hughes' Government asks you to give them a majority to allow this muddle and wanton waste of your money to continue."⁶³ The ability or otherwise of the Federal Government to assist the increasingly desperate soldier settlers was not their only matter of concern. The State Government also found difficulty in providing a solution to their problems. Parliament proved indecisive: prepared to tinker with the problem it ultimately agreed with the soldiers that the only hope of salvation lay in assistance from the Federal Government.^{63A}

While the conditions for orchardists, especially the soldier settlers, deteriorated during 1922, the problem between the unions and the Huon Timber Company reached crisis point. The dispute was at base an attempt by an employer to challenge the authority of the Federal Arbitration Court to make decisions for all Australian workers. There was indeed an accusation that the dispute had originated from advice given to the Huon Timber Company by officers of the State Industrial Department, at the instigation of the Lee Government. When Lee attempted to establish an independent board to arbitrate the dispute, the Secretary of the Timber Workers Union refused to attend on the ground that the dispute had "practically originated in your own

⁶² *ibid.*, December 8 1922.

⁶³ *ibid.*

Department through the action of the Industrial Officer advising the Huon Timber Company and its fictitious contractor⁶⁴ to work at Geeveston under the State Wages Board agreement rather than the Federal agreement. Certainly the workers' conditions were a matter of public comment.

Indeed the report of the local health inspector at Ramsgate was the subject of parliamentary debate when Albert Ogilvie raised the issue of McDougall and Co's decision to increase rent on several of its worker's houses already declared uninhabitable. The report painted a disturbing picture of the conditions under which many of the workers had to exist. One house the inspector reported on consisted of only two rooms, eight foot by eight foot, with a ceiling height of seven foot. The house was occupied by seven people, five of whom were children. The occupants all slept in one room. When the inspector opened the door of another house^{64A} ten dogs ran out. Sewage was also a problem and typhoid a regular guest.

When the Huon Timber Company closed in 1921 work had not entirely ceased. No doubt intending to overcome the earlier problem of housing workers in the bush, the company hired contract labourers to construct a tramway to its more distant timber stands. It had employed one L. Rapp from Dover as overseer and he in turn had hired non-union labourers from Hobart to carry out the work. These men had no sooner taken up residence at Mrs Doubles' Boarding House at Geeveston when local unionists cut off their food supply. In late May an altercation took place at the local picture theatre between Rapp's men and several local unionists. The following evening Mrs Double's kitchen was blown up though no one was seriously injured.^{64B}

Police from Hobart called to investigate the bombing, found themselves instead playing the role of intermediary and arranged a truce between Rapp's men and the unionists. The police were concerned that any provocation on their part might merely inflame what was already an explosive situation. The truce was short lived. Further violence followed when Rapp's men were assaulted with rocks and fence posts and threatened with pistols. The police arrested several unionists who, due to the deep interest in the case, were tried in a special court convened at the Geeveston Town Hall. The trial proved inconclusive. The

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, July 4 1922.

magistrate believed none of the witnesses for the defence and the prosecutor requested those found guilty be given only light sentences. After two unionists were found guilty charges against all other defendants were dropped, on condition Rapp's men were left in peace.



Huon Timber Company Geeveston.

The case had though reopened old wounds. In court Rapp was portrayed as having been a German sympathiser in the war. One defendant accused him of not playing the game, complaining that when he "was at the war bleeding, you tried to pull the flag down, and now you are trying to pull down our conditions."⁶⁵ Rapp's actions transcended the industrial arena: issues of patriotism were now paramount. Oddly the *Huon Times* seemed pleased with the troubles. Its Geeveston correspondent happily commenting "although we all deplore the present industrial troubles at Geeveston, there is no doubt that it has put the old town on the map. She hasn't been on her hind legs since the conscription referendum, when the old girl certainly did stand up and take considerable notice."⁶⁶

The agreed upon truce did not last long. In June there was further

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, June 9 1922.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, June 13 1922.

violence when the Timber Company's bridge at Kermandie was bombed; there were further assaults on Rapp's men. Attempts by both Ogilvie and the Government failed to resolve the issue. Not until October was the dispute finally settled when a new manager dismissed Rapp and his men and gave assurances that only unionists would in future be employed at the mill. The conflict at an end it was hoped the mill would soon reopen.

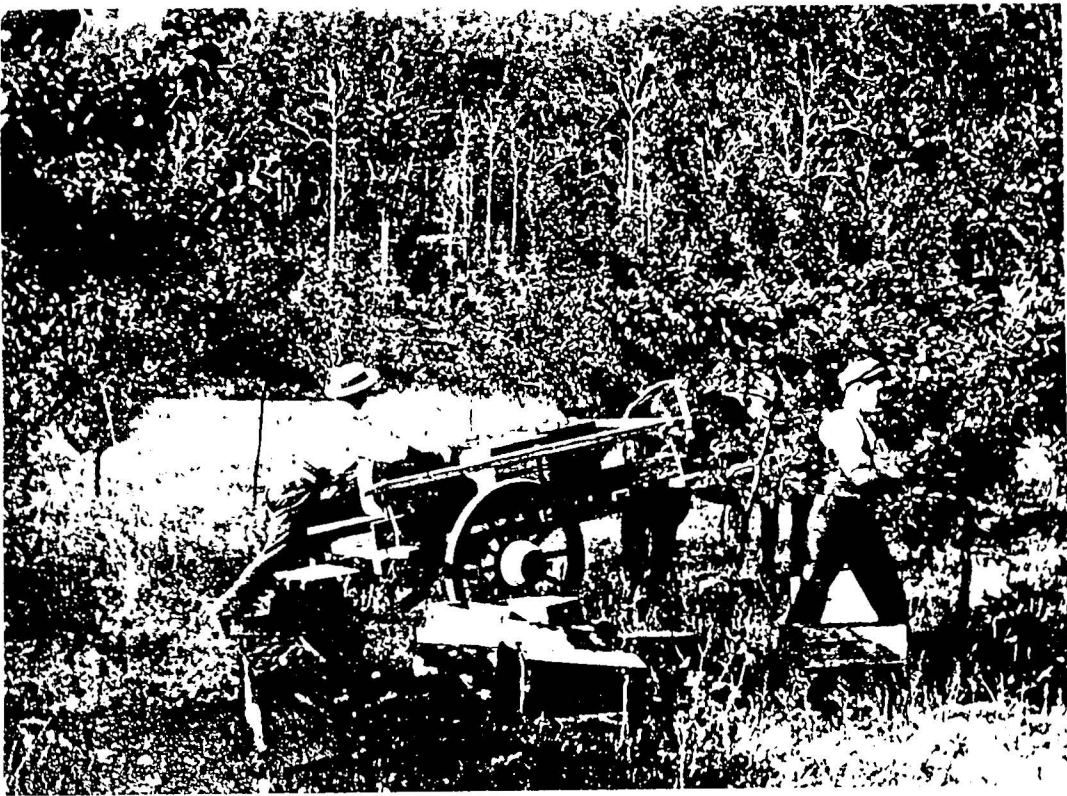
The promised reopening of the mill was to be the only good news in 1922. After extensive and protracted investigation the government announced in June that it had finally decided against the construction of a rail link from Hobart to the Huon. The cost of such a proposal far outweighed the gains, especially with the area now having an overseas outlet for its fruit at Port Huon and with motor transport rapidly replacing rail in other parts of the state.

The nightmare through which the Huon was passing seemed tangible. Nothing more clearly emphasised this perhaps than the failure of the Huonville High School.^{66A} Following persistent pressure the Government established the nucleus of such a school in 1921 providing children for the first time with the chance to continue their education beyond primary school without having to leave the area. The government's decision to site the school in Huonville aroused fierce parochial antagonisms and its request that the land for the school be provided by the community aroused feelings of ill-will between those wealthier members of the area and their workers. The school's protagonists had long argued it would help stem the exodus of young people to Hobart and give local children opportunities equal to those in the larger urban areas. The school especially offered children of the lower middle class and the workers the same opportunities enjoyed by the more affluent who traditionally sent their children to boarding school in Hobart.

After two years it was apparent that the vast majority of labourers perceived small advantage in post - primary education while larger landowners continued to send their children to school in Hobart. Fund raising efforts to support the school failed and it was closed in 1923 after student numbers fell to uneconomic levels. The school's closure emphasised the importance labouring families placed on the income to be derived from their children. For most of Tasmania's rural workers children were as good as money in the bank. The closure also clarified

breaking down class divisions the High School had served to highlight them.

The closure of the High school was soon seen to be merely another example of the continuing failure of the Huon to attract development. By 1923 the litany of such failure was long: the railway, the reclamation works, the timber industry, the High School and the continued attempts to attract and develop new industries in the area. A pall of despond had settled over the region. The greatest concern of all though still lay with the apple industry, for if it collapsed there was very little the area could offer anyone. As if in need of some collective reassurance growers faced the coming season with the only thing left them - hope.



Orchard Work: early 1920s.

The earliest reports suggested the Huon could yet again expect to export a bumper crop. The seasonable rains and mild winter had produced excellent prospects. The only impediments to success lay, as usual, in the high cost of freight and the vagaries of the English market:

With every organization upon which the grower is dependent for the production of his apples bleeding him to the last drop he must surely realise now that if it is to only satisfy the demands of the shipping companies, the labour unions, the manure and spray merchant, the saw mills and his numerous other dependents it is

up to him to make arrangements for ensuring better returns than he has been getting in the past.⁶⁷

In January growers received the depressing news that the freight charges for 1923 were to be set at 5s a case. Such news provoked a widespread feeling that once again growers were being asked to subsidise the shippers. Worse still, the unseasonably wet and cold weather which had set in before Christmas continued into January, both retarding the growth of the crop and encouraging the development of "Black Spot" where growers had delayed spraying. One member of the Huon Council despairingly noted that until "fruitgrowers were in a position to get out of the pawn shop they would never be any better off. Their fruit was pawned directly it left the orchards. They were loonies."⁶⁸

In late January, following enormous pressure on State and Federal Governments and Commonwealth and private shipping^{68A} lines, the freight on fruit was reduced to 4s and 4s 6d a case respectively. Such heartening news was soon offset by reports in May on the first shipment to England, reports which suggested growers, as with every season since the war, faced disaster. The first shipments had arrived in England in a most immature condition. Much of the fruit had been frozen on board the boats and was now afflicted with brown rot. The *Huon Times* reiterated its frequent warning as to the stupidity of these shipments. "To go on year after year sending further supplies of such fruit in the hope that nature could possibly be fooled for once is nothing short of imbecility"⁶⁹ Worse still, this early shipment established a bad reputation for fruit arriving later in the season and as this fruit had to compete with that from America and South Africa there was very little chance commercial prices would be obtained by Tasmanian growers.

Those growers lucky enough to see their fruit arrive in good condition now faced a new and more dangerous obstacle. By 1923 England's economy was falling into deep recession. Millions were unemployed and the bottom fell out of the fruit market. Returns on fruit of the best

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, October 17 1922.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, January 9 1923.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, May 1 1923.

quality ranged from 11s 6d to 15s 6d a case.⁷⁰ By the end of June this price had, in many instances, dropped to a pitiable 4s a case. With the average return on a case now realising 9s and the grower needing 10s 6d to make any kind of profit the vast majority of growers looked to lose heavily on the season.

In August the plight of the Huon orchardists was raised in the House of Representatives by the Nationalist member for Franklin, A. F. Seabrook. Seabrook, while acknowledging the Navigation Act and consequent union demands precluded any possibility of lower freight rates, asked Parliament to provide the orchardists with a bounty similar to that given Queensland sugar producers. In arguing his case Seabrook painted a depressing picture of Tasmania's apple industry. He told the House there was "no sector of producers which has suffered more during the last four or five years than the apple growers. One grower who sent twenty-five cases of apples to England received only seven pence, and in another instance a returned soldier exported twenty-five cases of apples, which realised five pounds five shillings in London, but after expenses were paid he received only 13/9d."⁷¹ Unfortunately for the orchardist, his apples did not play such an essential role as sugar in the Australian economy and parliament was offered little comfort.

The recession in the fruit industry and the unemployment that had resulted from the closure of the Huon Timber Company now forced many in the Huon to look elsewhere for work. In August⁷² the *Huon Times* drew attention to the number of predominantly young people, especially from Cygnet, who were leaving the area. The mainland, the zinc works at Hobart and the cement factory on Maria Island offered more attractive prospects. Although difficult to determine with any great accuracy, it would seem the exodus was substantial. Using the Commonwealth census of 1911 and 1922 it appears both Esperance (12%) and Port Cygnet (22%) suffered dramatic population losses while, somewhat paradoxically, Huon managed to increase its population by some 11%. The figure probably suggests many from Esperance and Port Cygnet had moved to the Huon Municipality looking for work, especially as it by now had become the recognised "capital" of the region. Of course

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, June 1 1923.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, August 24 1923.

⁷² *ibid.*, August 10 1923.

it is significant that figures for the following, more crucial years, are not available. Reports in the *Huon Times* suggest the peak out-movement occurred between 1923 and 1927. If this is so then the peak figures would have been much higher than those suggested above. Certainly, the Commonwealth census of 1933 reveals that neither Port Cygnet nor Esperance had by then managed to restore their population levels to those of 1911. Towns such as Strathblane, Hythe and Hastings now became little more than place names on a map.

But the Huon had no monopoly on such suffering. The whole state continued in deep recession. In October 1923 Premier Lee, despite an increasingly hostile backbench, moved to cut public expenditure and increase taxes. The decision forced a small number of dissident Nationals to cross the floor and Lyons was installed as Premier of a Minority Labor government.

By January 1924 the Huon believed itself to be a community under siege. The *Huon Times* laconically noted "the orchardist is not looking forward with much hope to the immediate future."⁷³ The crop appeared smaller than previous year's and black spot had reappeared in most orchards. The paper was highly critical of the Huon's over reliance on fruit and suggested growers must diversify into other crops, especially vegetables. The paper bemoaned a situation where growers, in deep financial strife, happily imported expensive vegetables from other areas of the state, vegetables which could easily be grown in the Huon. To survive, the area must not only seek new markets for its fruit but diversify into other areas of agriculture.

Following appeals to the Federal Government the quota on the export of fruit affected by black spot was raised and permission was given to ship 450 000 cases of such fruit.^{73A} The decision upset mainland growers who were fearful that the export of such fruit would lower returns on all Australian fruit. They vowed to lobby the Federal Government until the decision was rescinded. For its part, the *Huon Times* argued the export of this blemished fruit to be an economic necessity. There were instances in the Huon "of growers who would in a normal season ship 3,000 to 6,000 cases not being able to find as many as a hundred cases of clean fruit."⁷⁴ The paper suggested this move by mainland growers was a

⁷³ *ibid.*, January 8 1924.

cynical exercise to capitalise on the high returns expected from English markets now the supply of Tasmanian fruit had been so considerably reduced.

In February the acting Prime Minister, Earle Page, visited the Huon for a first-hand look at the plight of orchardists. To the grower's dismay he spent a mere hour in the area. He did provide growers with an assurance though that the Government would not bow to mainland pressures over its decision to increase the quota on blemished fruit. Within a week Page's reassurances rang hollow when Tasmanian growers were informed of the special conditions under which such fruit was to be exported.^{74A} Not only had each case to be marked "blemished", each apple had to be wrapped in paper marked "blemished". Operating on such small profit margins, many growers now believed the export of such fruit uneconomic. Worse still, the first consignment of this fruit to the mainland had been rejected, forcing growers to pay the shipping costs. Mainland growers soon renewed their attacks on the Federal Government's decision to allow the overseas export of such fruit.

In March the *Huon Times* editorialised on what it referred to as the Huon's time of stress:

In yet another year Fate, in the guise of nature, has destroyed the levies of the growers. The vast extent of the damage caused this season by the disastrous weather in the Huon orchards is becoming more and more apparent day by day, and the small grower in too many cases is faced with absolute ruin. Already many have been forced to relinquish their holdings and go out and seek other work to enable them to provide their families with the absolute necessities of life. It is heartbreaking to think that these men, who have put in years of toil, and have successfully met their various engagements and calls for interest, should now at one fell swoop be stripped of the whole of their labours by a relentless fate, against which they cannot possibly provide a safeguard.⁷⁵

Many growers were living off credit from local shopkeepers but that situation could not continue indefinitely. The situation promised commercial disaster for the whole of the Huon unless the government found some way to help them. The paper suggested growers might be given a moratorium on debt similar to that given the North-West Coast

potato growers when they had suffered from the "blight". The State Government was quick to reject such a suggestion.

The first reports of the prices prevailing on the English market only reinforced the gloom that hung over the Huon. The blemished fruit had not only attracted low prices but had encouraged American growers to glut the market with their own sub-standard fruit. This in turn had resulted in a further reduction on price. The *Huon Times* reported that as a consequence "all the early shipments from this state have proved unremunerative, if not actually showing a loss."⁷⁶ More worrying still was the rumour that due to Tasmania's inability adequately to supply mainland markets with good quality fruit the Federal Government was considering the idea of lifting its restriction on the importation of American fruit.

In June the State Government acted to help the growers. Although not prepared to make direct money grants it would offer credits for the purchase of orchard materials such as chemicals for spraying. Within weeks over 160 growers had approached the Government for relief at an estimated cost of £7 000 to the State's taxpayers.⁷⁶ The government's offer gave immediate boost to the distributors of such goods - firms such as Henry Jones and Co.

When growers received their first returns in July it was clear the season had been the worst on record: many received little or no income at all for their fruit. A significant contribution to the grower's losses had resulted from the way payments for shipping had been altered. The English-based shippers had for the first time decided the cost of freight should be paid for in Tasmania, not England. This meant dramatic increases in costs for growers due to the poor exchange rate between the Australian and English pound. The *Huon Times* cited the example of one grower who, having made £325 on his fruit had then to pay £12 on the exchange, £18 on the commission and £290 on freight. The grower received a return of a mere £13.⁷⁷

One direct and obvious consequence of the season's failure was a marked increase in unemployment, especially at Port Cygnet. Understandably the smaller growers, given their reduced crop, attempted to save money by carrying out orchard work themselves. The

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, May 25 1924.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, July 4 1924.

larger growers, reluctant to increase the size of their investment, had reduced the size of their casual labour force. Many of the overcommitted smaller growers were forced to leave their properties. In July the *Huon Times* reported 27 families to have left the Cygnet area over the past few weeks. One such family had left a property which in a good year had produced 1 000 bushels. In 1924 the family had only managed to produce fourteen bushels from the property. In the middle of July many of the unemployed gathered in Cygnet to discuss their situation. Those who attended the meeting heard the heartening news that the State Government was prepared to provide £3 000 for roadworks in the area in an attempt to relieve their unemployment. The Government's grant proved insufficient. In September the *Huon Times* was complaining that the Government was not doing enough and noted the departure of yet a further 40 to 50 families from the area. The paper claimed "the exodus of casual labourers from the district had been greater than at any other period of its history."⁷⁸ The renewal of the A. W. U.'s push for wage increases and the closure of the band saw mill at Geeveston, following a long and protracted dispute, did little to relieve the situation. The mill's closure reportedly cost the area a £1 000 a month in lost wages.⁷⁹ The Government's attempt to sell building blocks on land reclaimed from the dredging works at Franklin exemplified the situation; the blocks failed to attract a single bidder. Having failed to sell the land the Government now decided to donate it to the townspeople as a site for a recreation ground on condition they grassed and landscaped the area within three years. This reclamation site, described by one *Huon Times*' correspondent as a monument to "waste and apathy"⁸⁰ had cost the Tasmanian taxpayer £24 000.

There was some relief. The Government, at the urging of the local community, continued the extension of its electricity supply to the area while Franklin announced it was to revive its annual regatta. The radio grew in popularity and the motor car became an increasingly common sight on the roads. The Government promised to upgrade the

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, September 5 1924.

⁷⁹ Brown in *I Excel* misrepresents Jones's role. His assertion that overcutting and increased overseas competition forced Jones to "keep wages low" ignores Jones's basic motivation, to ensure timber workers were paid at the lower state rather than the higher federal award. And that at the Lee Government's connivance.

⁸⁰ *Huon Times*, July 25 1924.

Huon Highway, to commence construction of a new bridge at Huonville and to provide funding for an extension to the wharf at Port Huon. Local Geeveston growers arranged finance for the construction of a new cool store. The Port Huon Fruitgrowers Association, in the election of Hedley Calvert to the Legislative Council, continued its successful push for industry representation in Parliament. In contrast to the pre-war dreams of the Huon's boosters, these successes may have been somewhat muted, nevertheless, they encouraged orchardists at such a difficult time. Of course the orchardists' greatest hope lay in the possibility of a good season: after nine consecutively disastrous seasons such hope was all many had left.

The *Huon Times* became more strident in its call for growers to learn from past experiences, especially in relation to the 1923 and 1924 seasons. The paper warned growers to export only the best of their fruit and advised it should not be picked too early for "to sell large quantities of inferior fruit only (depressed) the market."⁸¹ There must especially be no export of fruit afflicted by diseases such as "black spot". The presentation and packaging should be of a high standard and the labelling accurate. Unless growers acted to restore the high reputation Tasmanian fruit had once held on the English market there could be no future for the industry. Early indications were auspicious: the weather had been kind, the crop substantial and the news from America suggested their season would be a poor one, their crop reduced by nearly 40%.

Despite all positive indications and in the face of sage advice given by the *Huon Times* the season proved yet again to be generally disappointing. Those who had shipped early and sent good fruit received excellent returns but by the end of July there had been a sharp drop in prices as vast quantities of fruit, often arriving in poor condition, flooded the English market. There was a widespread feeling that much of the fruit shipped in the second half of the year should never have been sent.⁸² Widespread union unrest in England also added to the growers' burden. For the smaller growers, such as soldier settlers, the returns were particularly poor. Yet again many received bills rather than

⁸¹ *ibid.*, January 6 1925.

⁸² *ibid.*, September 26 1925.

income for fruit. The *Huon Times*' warnings had been in vain. The harsh economic circumstances of the time probably left many growers with little option but to ship what they could.

As the Huon, along with the rest of the state, sank further into economic difficulty, Lyons went to the polls. As leader of a minority government he had found his position intolerable. Yet again the P. H. F. C. fielded candidates, supposedly standing as independents but in reality representing the interests of the new Country Party. For once it is notable that the campaign meetings in the Huon laid little stress on parochial issues but rather focused on matters of national import. Economics had pushed Federation to the forefront of political debate. The Navigation act and State and Commonwealth financial arrangements had by now become crucial. All political groups agreed Tasmania had suffered financially from its entry into the Commonwealth and there was the clear perception the time had come to review the state's financial dealings with that body.

During the election campaign the Labor Party received support from the Country Party candidates. Their leader, J. P. Piggott, claimed Lyons' Government had been a good government because it had effectively been non-party. Its reliance upon the support of independents meant it was unable to implement Labour policy, so forcing it to represent the interests of the people rather than of a specific section of the community. For their part Piggott and his fellow candidates were concerned about the rising strength of the unions and what they saw as the unreasonably high tariffs that were so adversely affecting primary exports while aiding urban industrial businesses. He was even more concerned about the drift of young Tasmanians to the mainland. For Piggott, Tasmania had "become the nursery of the Commonwealth"⁸³ and it needed to act quickly to stem the flow of young people to the mainland and work to attract new settlers to the state. Any failure to achieve this aim would, so he believed, have a marked effect upon the productive capacity of the State's rural sector.

The election results were a triumph for the Labour Party. In gaining sixteen seats it became the first party ever to hold office in its own right. In the Huon a great deal of cross-voting had taken place, due

⁸³ *ibid.*, May 19 1925.

(so the *Huon Times* argued),⁸⁴ to personalities rather than political parties having been the issue. The fact that the three biggest vote getters in the Huon were the Labor Party's Albert Ogilvie, long standing Nationalist member J. W. Evans and independent Country Party member Peter Murdoch gives credence to such a view. The declaration of the polls in Franklin left the Nationalists with only one seat. The independent Country Party held two seats and the Labor Party three. The Labor Party was now free to deal with the State's financial difficulties - difficulties that largely resulted from the burgeoning debt on soldier settlement.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, June 5 1925.

Chapter Six.

Resettlement and the Political Response: 1919-1925.

The Labor Party had held office for some 20 months before the decisive victory of June 1925. Since October 1923 the Party had struggled to resuscitate the state's crippled economy but had been frustrated by its role as a minority government, the continued depression in the state's rural sector and its inability to deal effectively with the continuing problem of soldier settlement. While the causes of the rural depression were largely the result of external factors the crisis in soldier settlement was essentially the consequence of National Party policy making, designed more to meet the needs of political survival than the requirements of an effective administration.

Of course Tasmania had always faced a major difficulty in repatriating its returned men, its small industrial base virtually precluding all other options to resettlement. But Tasmania's post-war depression gave added impetus to the soldiers' desire to acquire a farm or orchard. No doubt many of these men, when facing unemployment, saw resettlement as their only alternative. At the least it offered a home and hope - especially to a soldier with a family. It was a dangerous situation for the state. But such dangers were considerably heightened when the Commonwealth Government, despite promises to the contrary, hastily repatriated the soldiers from Europe.^{Al} Its actions overwhelmed the already limited resources of the Board which had to abandon all plans for an orderly and staged process of repatriation. Whatever hope the scheme may have had for success was fatally crippled at this point.

Each step in the process of resettlement was fundamentally flawed, as the following material drawn from the Huon will show. No real attempt was ever made to properly assess a soldier's ability to manage a property. That these unselected men were then allowed a near uncontrolled freedom to purchase properties throughout the state led to a rapid inflation in the price of land and the purchase of many properties of dubious quality. The unwelcome interference of Local Councils, avid to maintain land values, and land agents hungry for profits, only added to the danger of the situation.

But such dangers had long been widely recognised. In 1916 the Esperance Council, in criticising government intentions to settle men at Dover, had pointed out the inherent weaknesses of any plans to resettle men in Tasmania. Throughout 1916 and 1917 parliamentarians of all persuasions, and in both Houses of Parliament, had repeatedly warned of the catastrophe to come. Even the Board had displayed a decided nervousness towards the government's plans for resettlement. But the early warnings of men such as David Dicker, J. T. H. Whitsitt and the Board's own Philip Perry went largely unheeded by government.

An already dangerous situation was then made worse by inept decision making on the part of the government and Lee's continued rejection of any revaluation of settlers' properties. As resettlement foundered the government attempted to keep such knowledge from the Tasmanian electors. Rather allow the state to fall deeper into debt than face the wrath of the electorate. But Lee's adoption of such an approach clearly indicated desperation on his part. To isolate the general community from the settlers' failure was simply impossible. After all, the soldiers in their R. S. L. had a most powerful and public voice and Parliament, through the Newton and Hurst inquiries, repeatedly brought the settler's plight to public attention.

All attempts to relieve the settlers' difficulties eventually focused on the issue of revaluations. For many revaluations offered a solution to a system which had become an economic threat to the state. But Lee's opposition to revaluations was trenchant, an attitude that would help bring about the eventual downfall of his government. Lee's opposition to revaluations was based on five distinct grounds.^{A2} He believed the government's original terms of settlement had been generous and argued that talk of revaluations simply encouraged those who were in a position to pay to defer their repayments in the expectation of further benefits. Lee was also aware that the purchase of many farms had simply involved the financially convenient transfer of a property from a father to a son and that to offer revaluations in these cases simply meant an increase in the original prices paid for the properties. Lee's final, and arguably most important reasons for refusing revaluations, stemmed from the economic and political consequences of the decision. To offer revaluations in the present climate of depression would place an unfortunate burden on the state's taxpayers, and would most certainly expose the government's mismanagement of soldier settlement to the

public. In Lee's opinion a revaluation meant tacit admission of the scheme's failure and invited electoral destruction. Better to tamper with the scheme. But such tampering on Lee's part merely delayed the inevitable and passed responsibility for the scheme's success or failure to the settlers. Few of these were in a position to accept the challenge.

Perhaps no other place in Tasmania provides more clear evidence of the tragedy that surrounded soldier settlement than the Huon. Over 160 men¹, or 42% of the 385 who enlisted from the Huon², availed themselves of the government's offer. Remarkably only four settlers, or some 2.7% of this total, had enlisted from outside the area. Such facts underline the settlers' insistence on purchasing properties of their own choice and highlights one of the scheme's main difficulties.

The Huon, due to its topography, held few large estates. Consequently most of the properties purchased were small in size. While a number of these properties were devoted to mixed farming, mainly around the southern towns of Dover and Southport, the majority were orchards centred on the northern towns of Huonville and Cygnet. From the evidence available it would seem the vast majority of these properties, 67% or more, were purchased from relatives³ though the figure is likely much higher than this. Between 1917 and 1922 the government spent £156 070 in the purchase of these properties.⁴

The purchase of these orchards proved a large and somewhat risky investment, though the government's initial reluctance to purchase such properties was quickly overcome by its desire to satisfy the demands of the returned men who held such a strong moral claim on the state.

The purchase of these Huon properties and the resettlement of its men particularised the difficulties the government faced over resettlement. That the government's response merely compounded such difficulties was only too obvious. The consequences of this for the settler will be discussed in the following chapter.

The process of repatriation proved relatively simple. Soldiers wishing to take up properties experienced little difficulty in finding someone

¹ While this figure is drawn from the AB19 files it must be treated with caution due to the incomplete nature of those files. Evidence suggests the total number of settlers may have been closer to 175.

² Figure derived from L. Broinowski, (ed.), *Tasmania's War Record 1914-1918*, (Hobart, 1920).

³ Figure derived from the AB19 files on the Huon.

⁴ Figure drawn from the annual reports of the Closer Settlement Department, 1917-1922.

prepared to sell, especially relatives as noted above. On his return the soldier first completed an application form⁵ which sought information about his war service, marital status, previous experience and working capital. After registering an interest in a property the common practice was for the soldier to approach, or in many cases be approached by, a land holder willing to sell all or part of his property to the Board. The application for and offer of land to the Board would often be sent simultaneously.⁶ In a number of cases it is clear from a study of the handwriting that the letters of application were often written by the same person - in some cases it is clear that the person writing the letters was neither the would be purchaser or owner of the property but some third party. Evidently that third party was usually a local real estate agent or the owner of several properties in the Huon. To these people the Government's rush to purchase properties offered rich prospects. In a significant (but indeterminate) number of cases the soldier purchased his property from a relative - usually a parent. This appeared to offer mutual benefits. The soldier returned to a property with which he was familiar and had access to the funds his family derived from the Government's purchase. The family was both able to pass the property on to the son and receive financial compensation in the process. On at least two occasions returned men purchased their own properties - at well below valuation. This meant the soldier purchased a property with which he was familiar, acquired useful working capital and ensured his repayments were not too onerous. As might be expected these men were highly successful.

Having notified the Board of the property he wished to purchase, the soldier next had to establish his competence as a farmer or orchardist. The process proved relatively simple. When submitting his application for a farm the soldier was required to include at least three testimonials attesting his competence. As well the soldier had to provide details of previous experience. The vast majority of the Huon's settlers, some 75%, claimed to have had a background in orcharding. The remainder overwhelmingly claimed their previous occupation to have been that of a

⁵ Lands and Surveys Department, (LSD), 190.

⁶ That there was collusion between the vendor and purchaser in many of these cases is clear. It must though be kept in mind that while discussion of the process of repatriation is of a state-wide nature the examples are drawn specifically from the Huon. There is little doubt though that they reflected the wider pattern.

general labourer; usually performing work related to orcharding. A small number of applicants claimed no experience in farming; here were ironmongers, deckhands, sawmillers and a solitary teacher. Except for the teacher none of those applying for a property came from what might be called the professional or semi-professional classes.

It is probable that men in applying for a property regarded its possession as a step up the highly stratified social ladder of the Huon. In this case the Soldier Settlement Scheme offered the returned men the possibility of a recognisable social advancement. The ability of a man to run an orchard was determined either by the local fruit expert, a Local Advisory Board composed of local councillors and appointed by the Board to offer advice on both properties and applicants, or the Government's official evaluator in the Huon - W. F. Grace Calvert. On occasion two or three may have worked on a recommendation together. They agreed often but not always. The process appears to have been cosmetic for no applicant was ever refused a property. The establishment of an applicant's ability seems to have been a mere procedural step and there was never any real attempt to vet the applications.

This contradicts the Board's official reports which continually stressed the effort made to assure that only qualified settlers gained a property. Such practice also failed to meet the assurances required by Senator E. D. Millen, Federal Minister for Defence and Repatriation, who had demanded from the States a guarantee that correct screening processes would be put in place to safeguard the Federal Government's investment. At the 1916 Federal Conference in Melbourne Millen had argued that "it would be very injurious to the scheme if the impression were allowed to get abroad that every returned soldier was by reason of being such, entitled to ask for a piece of land...soldiers...cannot as a right demand land, but must prove this suitability to become land occupiers."⁷

The most reasonable explanation for Tasmania's defective screening process probably related yet again to the pressures under which the Board was operating. It is possible too that the temptation of acquiring Federal funds, at a time of severe restrictions on overseas borrowings,

⁷ Report of the Resolutions, Proceedings and Debates of the Conference of Representatives of the Commonwealth and State Governments and of the Federal Parliamentary War Committee, February 1916., C P. P., Vol 1 Session 1914-1917., Paper No 299.

proved too alluring. No doubt if the Board had applied vigour then it would have faced both the wrath of the majority of Tasmanians and the increasingly powerful R. S. L. No political party wished to be seen as acting contrary to the interests of the returned men. Any concerns Millen may have had were subsumed under the political realities of the situation.

Some did though warn as to the dangers of settling unqualified men on farms, especially orchards. It will be remembered that Alex Hean had, as Minister in 1917, sought specific reassurances from Board President Philip Perry that only carefully selected men would be placed on orchards while J. B. Hayes as Minister in 1918 had been forced to reassure a doubting G. M. Foster that only suitably qualified settlers would be given orchards. Throughout January to May 1919 the *Huon Times* had repeatedly expressed concern as to the Government's plans to settle unskilled men, remarking "the very eagerness of the Board in endeavouring to do good...is likely to lead to their undoing and inflict very great hardships on the very ones it is intended to benefit."⁸ In February the paper continued to cast doubts upon the wisdom of the scheme and complained that "in too many instances in this district at least, men have been placed on orchard properties who have not even an elementary knowledge of those attributes which go to make up a successful orchardist and will no doubt fall into error for want of knowledge."⁹ In April the attacks continued. The *Huon Times* endorsed the views of F. J. Hyndes, Nationalist candidate in the then House of Assembly elections, who warned "it is just as absurd to propose making farmers or orchardists of returned soldiers as to attempt to make all of them doctors or carpenters."¹⁰

The Board often received unsolicited advice from the general public. In May 1919 T. Wilson of Dover warned the Board of the unsuitability of one Thomas Dale who had applied for a property in the area. Wilson reported:

who ever has recommended him (Dale) has given you false references, has he isn't adapted for that of orcharding at all, has

⁸ *Huon Times*, January 1 1919.

⁹ *ibid.*, February 7 1919.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, April 1 1919.

you can find out for yourself, he doesn't know a plum tree from an apple, also both W. Seabourne and him are too fond of the hotel, and have made there brags that they will have the farms for the time being and make a few pounds and clear out."¹¹

That a number of soldiers intended to take advantage of the system must be only too apparent and was widely recognised in Board reports. The Government's offer of free rent and board appeared a most attractive proposition to many settlers. Despite Wilson's advice Dale was given a property in September 1919 but surrendered it in November 1922.

The letters that passed between the soldiers and the Board present us with an interesting picture of the varied pressures placed on the Board during the years 1919 and 1920, the peak period for property purchases. A significant number of these letters were sent between the months of October and April when the fruit season was at its height. The letters continually urged the Board to speed up the selection process so the soldier might gain the value of the crop and allow him a good start on the land. Such a sale was in the interests of the property owner too as he was able to offer the property at a higher valuation - especially considering the crisis the fruit industry was experiencing at the time. If the Government purchased the property then the owner was assured of a good price for his crop - an assurance he did not have if he was to market the apples through the usual outlets.

Patrick Smith of Franklin provides a typical example. In November 1919 he wrote to the Board "I have fill in the form in Hobart and the are two testimonials and one from two reliable land owners and I will be much obliged if you push my place through as soon as possible for I want to get this crop and I no place to live."¹² As Smith's letter suggest, the need to purchase a property to gain the crop, strong economic incentive as it was, was often overshadowed by the distress the soldier suffered while awaiting the Board's decision. Many of the soldiers, especially married men, were faced with a difficult time upon their return. Although the Government had promised employment it had found it difficult, given Tasmania's worsening economic climate, to keep such a commitment. Many soldiers saw the Government's offer of a property to be a way of providing their family with a place to live. In December

¹¹ AB19/1030.

¹² AB19/1974.

Smith wrote again "If I have not got it by the 21 I will not have a roof over my head and I am a married man and will have to shift out of the place I am in and I cannot get a place about here so you can see I am in a very poor state for I have no home of my own at all."¹³ Smith was not alone. Russel Ayres, in similar circumstances at Ranelagh, wrote to the Board in March 1920 "I have no house to live in while I am waiting to get fixed up and to keep myself and my wife in lodgings while waiting on the Board is costing me a good sum of money."¹⁴

Some soldiers in their applications displayed an open belligerence towards the Board. Charles Armstrong from Cygnet wrote in October 1920, having apparently applied for six properties in the previous twelve months. He was near breaking point:

My mother, father and all my friends live in Cygnet and this is my home and I want a property here. I consider I have been treated very badly and unless I receive some satisfactory reply within four days I will certainly have my case brought before parliament.¹⁵

Unfortunately for Armstrong his application for a property coincided with the Board's decision in October 1920 "to discontinue the policy of acquiring and settling returned soldiers on single properties."¹⁶ By the end of 1920 the Board had already cancelled leases on 142 properties and was keen to place new applicants on these.¹⁷

The 1920-1921 report of the now Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Board stressed the continued pressure under which it had operated. Indeed that the government should have seen fit to establish a separate Ministry under Alex Hean solely to oversee resettlement clearly underlines the Board's comments. Such pressure had necessitated the secondment of four officers of the Crown Law Department merely to expedite conveyancing. Even then many soldiers found themselves in possession of properties before they had received legal title. The Board Secretary, J. L. McGough, commented "it was only by continuous overtime work on the part of members of the Board and Department

¹³ AB19/1974.

¹⁴ AB19/2458.

¹⁵ AB19/4226.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Board: Report for 1918-1919, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXI, 1919-1920, Paper No. 58.

staff that the results were attained."¹⁸ By now the Board had provided farm holdings for 1 000 returned men. Board President G. C. Rudge reported that during the year 790 of 1 873 properties on offer had been purchased "at prices which...were such as provided a good security to the State, and ensured the success of the settler, provided he were willing to work."¹⁹ Sixty-five of these properties had been purchased for settlers in the Huon. This brought the total number of such properties to 110, a figure which represented some 77% of the final number to be purchased. And this in a two year period between June 1919 and June 1921.

The rate at which these purchases had been made led to a rapid increase in land prices, acknowledged by Rudge in his report: "The numerous purchases made by the Crown for the returned soldiers were responsible for an inflation of values, but this was inevitable."²⁰ This inflationary process made it difficult for the Board to purchase what it considered to be suitable properties. Indeed, the pressure placed upon the Board had been so great that it had been unable to provide the Government with financial statements for the years 1918-1920. In effect, neither the Government nor the Board had any clear idea of the scheme's financial ramifications for State Treasury. There was a certain nervousness in some quarters. In June 1921 the Minister responsible for soldier Settlement, Alexander Hean, reported to Parliament:

Owing to the great demand for land, far in excess of estimates, it has been necessary to expend money beyond the authorisation of Parliament....It is necessary, however, to obtain Parliamentary sanction to the borrowing of an additional sum of £100 000 to cover purchases already made and further acquisitions. This will bring the total amount authorised to be raised to £2 350 000. It is anticipated that this sum will enable the soldier settlement to be completed.²¹

In December E. H. Pretzman, the Auditor-General, questioned the Board's financial responsibility after finding certain of its practises to be

¹⁸ Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Board. Report for 1919-1920, T. J. P. P., Vol I XXXIII, 1920-1921, Paper No 22.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Ministerial Statement of Minister For Lands and Works Alexander Hean 1919-1920, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXIII, 1920-1921, Paper No 38.

inconsistent with a proper system of accounting. Pretyman was also concerned at the large State borrowings required to fund the scheme, borrowings rarely sanctioned by Parliament. While acknowledging such practises to be essentially the result of the agreement entered into between the Federal and State Governments, that is, monies expended on repatriation would be "reimbursed" by Federal Government, he warned "overdraft borrowing is unauthorised by Parliament and during the period in question the Treasurer was embarrassed by intimations from the bank (Commonwealth)...that it would be necessary to stop further credit."²² Pretyman claimed the present system of accounting to be the result of the government's misunderstanding of the Commonwealth's role in resettlement. The State Government, so he claimed, erroneously believed the financial responsibility for soldier settlement to rest with the Federal Government -the sole responsibility of the State Government then being the acquisition of land. As he noted, there "seems to have grown the idea, on the part of the States, that the whole matter of land settlement is a responsibility belonging to the Commonwealth. I maintain that it is not."²³ Pretyman's concern was soon dismissed by Government. The situation did not improve. In October 1922 the then Minister, E. F. B. Blyth, informed Parliament "Ministers have under consideration the question of endeavouring to secure additional financial assistance from the Commonwealth Government in view of the cost to the State being so much in excess of anticipation."²⁴ The scheme had become a financial disaster for the Government.

These financial concerns were soon exacerbated by the rapid escalation in the number of men leaving their properties. Rudge claimed such departures resulted from either the settlers' belief that farming "did not call for any special exertion"²⁵ or their "want of knowledge, thrift and perseverance"²⁶ or from the fact that the interest

²² Returned Soldier Settlement: Papers and Correspondence Between the Auditor-General and the Honourable the Minister for Lands, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXV, 1921-1922, Paper No 62.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Ministerial Statement of the Minister for Lands and Mines E. F. B. Blyth 19 October 1922, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXVII, 1922-1923, Paper No 33.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

free period had come to and end. The claim effectively transferred the responsibility for failure from the Board to the settlers. It was not the process of resettlement that was at fault but the settlers themselves. At least Rudge was able to report these departures to have eased pressure on the Board's purchases though the settlers still had a decided preference for selecting properties of their choice rather than moving onto vacant properties in unfamiliar parts of the state. That the settlers were allowed, even encouraged in their choice, only underlined the scheme's failings.

If the Board's process of screening prospective settlers had been ill-judged then its practice of selecting properties was even more flawed. This is not surprising when those who selected settlers were also asked to approve properties for purchase. Although the Government believed local men could provide the best advice it meant in practice that those possessed of substantial local business interests oversaw the purchase of land in their area. This caused more bias than insight.

The major information the Board sought from its advisors, both local and departmental, was the value that might be placed upon a property and its ability to support a man and his family. When it came to valuations it is clear that the Local Advisory Board provided valuations which were consistently, sometimes significantly, higher than that of either Grace Calvert or the local fruit expert. It is also clear that there was often confusion as to whether a property could adequately support a man and his family. A large number of the properties purchased by the Board were, according to the assessor's reports, in a poor condition. There was a suspicion amongst some members of the Board that certain owners were taking advantage of the resettlement scheme to divest themselves of second rate properties. The combined pressure of soldiers waiting to purchase and a depressed fruit industry more than likely helped owners of marginal properties make the decision to sell. Of course the fact that a property was in poor condition need not have necessarily precluded it from purchase. The reports on properties clearly show the widely held belief that marginal properties might prove suitable providing the settler was of the right quality. Given the problems related to the selection of settlers such an idea seems somewhat misplaced. Many of the settlers' files contain comments such as "a good man no difficulty of a living in 2-3 years time."²⁷ This belief

²⁷ AB19/1926.

that the returned soldiers would prove capable of working what was considered a poor property into a payable one perhaps had its genesis in the early repatriation conferences. There prevailed the notion that after spending years in the trenches the peace and quite of a farm would assist men to return to a more normal form of existence. Many proponents of the repatriation scheme in Tasmania certainly made such points. W. Shoobridge, it will be remembered, had suggested settling returned men in close proximity so that the camaraderie established at the front might be retained on their return. The Board in allowing soldiers to settle on properties of their choice, close to family and friends, tacitly recognised the rehabilitatory function of the scheme.

All this begged the question of what was a good man. The Board found difficulty in determining the answer to that question. No man who applied for a property was rejected even when, in the case of George Mason's application for a property at Police Point, the Local Advisory Board informed the Board that:

it is not advisable to let him have it as he is working 5 days a week and received 10/- per day & is also receiving a pension and informing me he will be able to be in the property one day a week which would be useless & of course he wants stock for sure. I think in this district you will have enough failures in the land later as I can see that some don't intend to try.²⁸

Mason, who had been unsuccessful in previous applications, eventually received his property because the time had come to "give him a trial."²⁹ He surrendered his lease fourteen months later, after leasing a car provided him by the Board to the local hotel owner at Dover. A similar case was that of William Seabourn at Raminea. In Seabourn's case the Local Advisory Board reported:

In this case the committee consider the applicant most unsuitable to deal with such a property. He is a young fellow without any orchard experience, & more over cannot be called a sober man. The committee regretfully feel they cannot recommend granting the application.³⁰

Seabourn received his property in August 1919 but soon left. The belief

²⁸ AB19/1249.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ AB19/848.

would seem to have been that any man deserved a property provided he was a returnee. Even if Mason and Seabourn were exceptions to the rule, the belief that a good man might turn a poor property to advantage was a sentiment too obviously optimistic in the Huon. Its converse was the misleading, though for the Government's part useful idea, that any settler in difficulty was himself the cause of such difficulty; no blame could attach to the Government's policy of acquiring farms. Evidence suggests that even where a genuine trier took up a poor property the chance of success was small. Poor properties produced poor prospects: an axiom clear to many, but not to the Board.

The *Huon Times* was convinced the Government had seriously erred in selecting its properties. The paper believed evidence for its stand lay readily to hand in the recent experiences of those Anglo-Indian settlers who had taken up properties in the Tamar Valley. Most of these men had been English officers from India looking to an easy retirement in Tasmania. Their experience proved disastrous and many lost their life savings in such ventures. The paper noted that the government:

having induced these men to invest, by advertising and other methods, ...(seemed) to have come to the conclusion that here their duty ended, and...passed them on to astute speculators who, we fear in too many cases, have not failed to unload all sorts of so-called orchard properties on to these unsuspecting clients.³¹

The *Huon Times* felt the situation to be especially despicable, for despite such experiences the Tasmanian Agent-General in London was at present continuing to lure British manufacturers and soldiers to take up similar properties in the State. At least one would-be Anglo-Indian settler had the foresight, unlike so many of his compatriots, to investigate the properties on offer before investing. The *Huon Times* reported his conclusion which underlined the danger of purchasing orchards in Tasmania. "As a matter of fact, whilst allowing that there may be good orchards in Tasmania, he had not been able to see one."³² Concern over these Anglo-Indian investors was such that it eventually led the State Government to hold an inquiry in late 1920.³³

What action the Government took then seems to have been

³¹ *Huon Times*, July 21 1920.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*, December 3 1920.

ineffectual. The problems continued. In 1923 W. E. Cowper, an English ex-serviceman, arrived in Tasmania hoping to take up a soldier settlement property. Having rejected orcharding properties in the Launceston area he travelled south in hope of finding a suitable property there. Upon arriving in Hobart Cowper approached officers of the local R. S. L. who promptly advised him to look to some other means of repatriation; advice he readily accepted. From Melbourne Cowper wrote a detailed and revealing letter of his experiences to Premier Lee. Cowper told Lee that at the R. S. L. headquarters he had met a Mr. Francombe "one of the largest fruitgrowers in Tasmania"³⁴ who had painted a poor picture of any orchard property that might be for sale. (The "Francombe in question was undoubtedly T. A. Frankcomb from Huonville.) According to Cowper "Francombe" claimed that in Tasmania "good paying orchards were few and far between, and were rarely, if ever, for sale, and that there were hundreds of bad orchards on unsuitable land and in unsuitable positions for every good paying orchard property."³⁵ "Francombe", as President of the Huon Branch of the R. S. L., had not been so generous in his advice to other would be settlers in the Huon.

The experience of A. S. Brennan gave ready substance to "Francombe's" comments. In 1923 Brennan accepted a lease on a vacated soldier settlement property at Franklin. Brennan, as a former packing instructor with the Department of Agriculture, was able to provide an experienced appraisal of the property he proposed renting. He complained it was difficult to spray for pests as there was no permanent water supply. The fences were inadequate and the house and outbuildings were in a state of disrepair. But it was the orchard that proved his greatest problem. Although the property consisted of 23 acres, only half were of practical use. The orchard itself occupied a mere three and a half acres, divided into three separate blocks due to the contour of the land. This meant that while the orchard was compact, it was expensive to work.

The orchard consisted of 514 apple and pear trees, 40 plum trees and 17 cherry trees - the last of which had to be grubbed due to disease. There were over 20 varieties of apple and pear trees, few of which were

³⁴ PD1/384/176/5/23, 4 February 1922.

³⁵ *ibid.*

valuable in a commercial sense. Brennan expected to make a loss until the orchard was reworked to more commercial lines of fruit. He estimated that the most fruit he might expect to pick in the fruit season could amount to no more than 600 cases, a number insufficient to pay interest and rent on the property.

Commentary such as the above too easily leads to the view that the Board, in purchasing a property, looked only to those deemed capable of supporting a man and his family through work carried out solely on the property. This was not always so. The Board regularly purchased properties knowing full well they would not provide a full living to the settler. A significant number of properties was purchased in the expectation that the settler would derive additional income from outside labour. Admittedly the Board was not well disposed to such properties and as a rule purchased them only after being pressed by the would be settler. Nevertheless, the Board, in purchasing such properties, redefined the type of property deemed appropriate for resettlement. All this is apparent in comments passed by the official evaluators. On one occasion the Local Advisory Board at Cygnet informed the Board that a property it had been asked to evaluate would not provide "a full living..but...would be a cheap and handy home for a working man."³⁶ Grace Calvert remarked of another property "so long as work was obtainable at the sawmill, all would be well but if this closed down a man would only exist on this."³⁷ Another time Grace Calvert informed the Board "this property would never keep a man and his family, but by working on it some 4 to 5 acres of small fruit could be grown...the lessee will have to earn most of his income from outside."³⁸ On a further occasion Grace Calvert noted of another property "the only good thing about this property is the one and a quarter acres of raspberries. I certainly cannot see a full living & interest to be made off the property."³⁹

It is clear then that the Board was aware that many, perhaps most, of

³⁶ AB19/2609.

³⁷ AB19/2750.

³⁸ AB19/2172.

³⁹ AB19/1871.

the properties it was purchasing in the Huon were of a poor quality.⁴⁰ The Board was also aware that the productive areas of these properties was small and often carried varieties of apples and other fruit which were economically unviable. As remarked above, the purchase of many of these properties wherein the settler was expected to supplement his income from labouring off the property essentially reworked the definition of a workable property under the terms of the Act. The evidence suggests such a reworking to have been the consequence of necessity, that up to 1922 when it was able to cease purchasing properties, the Board had been acting in a climate far removed from conventional economic rationality. The rapid return of the men, the sense of debt they were owed and the varied demands they made added fuel to this irrational economic climate.

Local Huon pressures played their part too. Throughout 1919 there had been numerous complaints about the Board's operations. While a number of these complaints related to the supposed poor treatment of certain soldiers, the majority dealt with the vexed problem of property evaluations. If the selection of both properties and men had taxed the Board to the limit then the issue of valuation raised real difficulties.

In January 1919 there were complaints from the Cygnet Council over the Board's valuations. Councillor Norris, a member of the Local Advisory Board, complained that in early 1918 he had valued a property for a local soldier at £1 700 only to find that the Board's offer was £1 400. Norris claimed that while the owner and the soldier were both satisfied with his valuation the Board had rejected it. He warned that if the Board treated future valuations in a similar manner then "there would not be a soldier settlement in the district."⁴¹ Other Councillors were quick to support Norris. Many claimed knowledge of other occasions when men had been refused assistance due to the Board's valuations being substantially lower than those of the Local Advisory Board. The Cygnet Council believed the root of the problem lay in the Board's decision to use farming properties as a benchmark for valuations and argued this to be unreasonable for while orchards might be small their productive value was usually high. No ready comparison could be

⁴⁰ Close scrutiny of what evidence is available on the AB19 files suggests near 80% of properties in the Huon received similar comment.

⁴¹ *Huon Times*, January 14 1919.

drawn between an acre of grazing land and an acre of orchard land.

The fact that the Board's valuations affected all property valuations in the Huon was salient. Councillor Harris warned that if the Board pursued its present policy then the consequence would be a general decline in the value of all properties in the area.⁴² Of further concern to the Cygnet Council was the Government's decision to allow soldier settlers remission on their rates for four years.^{42A} The Council considered this to be unfair and argued that the Government should reimburse local Councils for lost income. The potential threat of the Board's valuations to general property values and the loss of rates posed a grave threat to local orchardists. The growing crisis in the fruit industry meant the rateable value of their properties was the only financial security many growers had.

February 1919 witnessed renewed criticism of the Board's operations.^{42B} There were claims that it had acted upon the purchase of some properties without reference to the local advisory committee at all. There was puzzlement among many on the Cygnet Council as to how the Board arrived at valuations without having sought the advice of the Local Advisory Board, that body of men chosen to provide the Board with the benefits of local knowledge. There were fears too that the Board had allowed land agents to play a role in the purchase of some properties. It was argued that these men had only their commission at heart, not the interests of the soldier. The Board had long been aware of such danger, but what if a member of one of the Local Advisory Boards was also a land agent? Robert Harvey, a member of the Cygnet Advisory Board and a leading estate agent provides such a case.

Harvey was a leading member of the Cygnet community and a local businessman of note. He held interests in a wide range of commercial ventures from orcharding to retailing and sawmilling. Appointed to be one of the local valuers he had soon come to the notice of Grace Calvert, the Government's representative in the area. Grace Calvert was unimpressed with Harvey's advice and regularly reported such misgivings to the Board. In 1919 Grace Calvert had been asked to place a valuation on one of Harvey's properties at Nichols Rivulet. Harvey had put the property on the market for £2 500 but Grace Calvert reported "the value placed on this property is absurd, it would not pay interest on £2

⁴² *ibid.*

500. It is in frightfully bad order. The old orchard neglected and full of blackberries."⁴³ Grace Calvert warned that "should the local valuation be anything like the amount of the offer, I consider that the matter should be gone into."⁴⁴ The Local Advisory Board estimated the property to be worth £1 860 and suggested that "a few hundred pounds of work spent on scrubbing to get it in shape but then it should be reproductive for 2 men."⁴⁵ Harvey eventually accepted £1 500 and the property was taken up by a William Stanton. In 1923, however, Stanton's lease was cancelled and the property returned to Harvey at a very much reduced rental. When evaluating another Harvey property at Cygnet in 1920 Grace Calvert reluctantly, but no doubt perceptively, informed Rudge "I always have a very suspicious feeling about me when R. H. is so deeply solicitous about a man's welfare. It's beastly of me I know."⁴⁶

Of course Calvert's reservations about Harvey merely gave expression to the long held fears of many. The State Government and the Board had always been concerned that their entry into the property market would lead to inflationary land prices. Indeed, early conferences held to plan repatriation had been keenly aware of the issue. In an attempt to curb such a possibility acting Prime Minister W. A. Watt had written to Premier Lee in November 1918 to ask whether it might be possible for the Board to work with the Commonwealth Taxation Department "with a view to preventing the payment of prices which are generally in excess of values declared to for taxation purposes by the owners of such properties."⁴⁷ Though well intentioned the suggestion proved ineffective. The question of inflated values would soon become as much a political as an economic problem. As W. E. Cowper told Lee in 1923:

properties were bought for soldier settlement at exorbitant prices from "friends of the family", and the prices at which the soldiers were allowed to take up the land were in many cases so high as to make it utterly impossible for them to make a living and overhead charges.⁴⁸

⁴³ AB19/1114.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ AB19/4226.

⁴⁷ PD1/323/176/10/18, 11 November 1918.

⁴⁸ PD1/384/176/5/23, 4 February 1922.

The consequent rapid increase in land prices would have been more rapid but for the actions of men such as Grace Calvert. There the Board gained some control over inflated land prices: that all land purchased in the Huon carried a price that marked the compromise between the Board and local valuers attests this fact. But for the work of men such as Grace Calvert the eventual cost to the State and failure rate among settlers would have been much higher. The Board's preparedness to bow to the soldiers' desire to settle on small properties close to their local communities and families was a prime factor in the rapid inflation in the price of land. Having conceded that, one must yet again keep in mind the pressures placed upon the Board at this time, most of all from the soldiers themselves.

In December 1919 Lee met representatives of the Sailors and Soldiers Fathers Association in Launceston to discuss what they felt to be the slowness of resettlement. The deputation claimed that delays in purchasing properties fuelled already inflated land prices. The Government's tardiness in purchasing Lade's Estate near Ringarooma was seen to be a typical example. Such tardiness, it was claimed, had caused the price of the property to increase by £6 an acre. The owners of these properties, realising the pressure the Board was under, simply set their own prices. One member of the deputation, a local land agent by profession, told Lee the North-West Coast "was crawling with soldiers who could not get land"⁴⁹ and that many were now leaving the State to try their luck on the mainland. Minister Hayes assured Lee the deputation's claims were unfounded. Hayes claimed the delays in the purchase of properties were usually the fault of the returned men who often persisted in selecting properties already rejected by the Board. But what Hayes conveniently forgot to tell Lee, if the Board's practice of purchasing properties in the Huon is to be regarded as typical, was that many of these properties were eventually purchased anyway. The Board's position was clearly an invidious one: damned by some for haste and castigated for caution by others.

The difficulties confronting the Government over Soldier Settlement had not passed unnoticed in Parliament. From its inception the scheme had been the subject of often bitter debate but the rapid increase in Board activity between 1918 - 1920 led to a growing uneasiness amongst

⁴⁹ PD1/339/176/3/19, 2 December 1919.

most members of Parliament. In January 1920 the Treasurer, Sir Elliot Lewis, warned Lee the State faced a financial crisis if the present expenditures on soldier settlement were not curbed or financial assistance was not provided by the Federal Government. Lewis blamed the situation on the rapidity with which men had returned to the State, pointing out that the original estimate of 800 settlers by 1920 "has been largely exceeded, 920 men having already settled, quite 200 applications are, at present, being dealt with, and probably another 400 men will have to be provided for."⁵⁰ More worrying, claimed Lewis, was the impossibility of accurately estimating the final number to be settled and the cost of that settlement. As Lewis noted:

the earliest arrivals were mainly men who had returned owing to injuries received, and the per centage of applications for land was low. The men who returned after the Armistice was signed, for the most part, physically fit, and a large proportion had enlisted from farming districts, and the per centage of applications for land was consequently much higher.⁵¹

Following Lewis's warning Lee wrote to Prime Minister Hughes seeking an extra £2 226 703 in assistance. Hughes agreed to advance the State £500 000 which he claimed, when added to the monies already provided, would pay for the Tasmanian scheme up until December 31 1919. Any further payments were to be discussed at a future date. Hughes's commentary was scathing. He criticised Lee for having exceeded the resettlement quota as decided at the Premiers' Conference of January 1919 and chastised him for having failed to notify the Federal Government of such excess - as was required. Hughes's anger was motivated by the potential damage Lee's claim posed to his Government. Hughes's Nationalists had failed to gain a majority in the Federal election of December 1919 and now held office only with the support of eleven independents. When these independents formed themselves into the Country Party on January 22, Hughes's position became critical.

To add to Hughes's difficulties, soldiers' organisations were now claiming his Government was doing far too little to help the returned men. Hughes had found difficulty raising sufficient money to satisfy their demands. If he lost the support of both the soldiers and the

⁵⁰ PD1/354/176/25/5, Treasury File 25/5/20 (Enclosed), 17 January 1919

⁵¹ *ibid.*

Country Party he faced political destruction. Hughes warned Lee his request was "calculated to embarrass my Government, and, if followed generally by the States, might be accompanied by consequences of a serious nature."⁵² While not spelt out it was clear Hughes referred to his own political demise and the consequent danger that the Labor Party might gain office Federally. As a good Nationalist Lee no doubt was aware of this possibility.

But Lee faced embarrassment of his own. Unprepared to raise State taxes to cover the surging cost of soldier settlement he could see no other course but to seek help from the Federal Government. His approach to State Parliament in late 1920 for an extra £1 000 000 to help fund shortfalls in the cost of soldier settlement had met with a decidedly hostile reception in the Legislative Council.⁵² There was widespread criticism of the manner in which the resettlement scheme had been run and deep concern for the plight of those many soldiers already settled. It would be cynical to suggest the recent enfranchisement of soldiers for Legislative Council elections to have provided the catalyst for such response. The Legislative Council had long been critical of the Government's program of repatriation. Councillors still believed the scheme merely replaced experienced farmers with inexperienced soldiers and despite the Government's arguments to the contrary felt such dispossession was unlikely to further the State's interests. The view was still widely held in Council that the resettlement scheme had been a pretext for the dissolution of Tasmania's larger estates. While still vociferous in such arguments, the Legislative Council now harbored a new fear that overshadowed all else: a fear for the fate of those soldiers struggling to make a living on their farms.

Some Councillors were critical of the prices that had been paid for properties - especially the smaller farms as typified by purchases in the Huon. John Hope claimed "some of the valuers who have recommended the purchasing of blocks would not have taken them themselves at the same price."⁵³ James McDonald, a former member of the Clarence Advisory Board, claimed he had seen soldiers settled on properties not recommended by his Board and suggested that an independent inquiry into such purchases would no doubt bring in a

⁵² *ibid*

⁵³ *The World*, November 30 1920

report critical of the Government's present policy. He was convinced "many returned men who had been placed on the land were going to do no good to themselves or the State."⁵⁴ With high prices leading to high interest rates McDonald was "very doubtful as to whether they were conferring a benefit on"⁵⁵ the soldiers. Most Councillors believed that the final cost of settling soldiers in Tasmania would run into millions of pounds and that if some form of revaluation was not soon offered the soldiers they would leave their farms in droves.

Alan Wardlaw defended the Government. He argued that the Government's land purchases would prove a sound investment and that even if the soldier's departures necessitated the sale of their properties the Government would realize a considerable profit on its investment. Wardlaw reminded Council that "whatever happened, they must fulfil their promises to the returned men."⁵⁶

In August 1921 the growing plight of many settlers was raised in the House of Assembly when J. A. Hurst, a returned soldier, moved to restructure the interest repayments on settler's loans. Hurst claimed his experiences as a farmer had shown him that a soldier living on a property valued at £1 800, in receipt of advances for stock, implements and buildings, forced to pay £250 interest in the first eighteen months, faced a demand that "was an impossibility"⁵⁷ because "too much altogether had been paid for the land."⁵⁸ Hurst claimed to be in receipt of letters from settlers in every part of the State asking him to do something to help them through their present difficulties. He told Parliament "with the high price of stock and seed prevailing, the soldiers were unable to make anything from the property, and few of them knew they had to make half-yearly instalments for the stock, seed and implements."⁵⁹

Hurst's reference to the lack of understanding amongst settlers as to their financial obligations is significant. If the settlers in the Huon were at all typical then Hurst's point is a most telling one. Many settlers in the

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, December 2 1920.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, August 10 1921.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

Huon were possessed of poor literary skills; indeed a number were illiterate. It is likely few understood the financial contracts into which they entered. Many of their letters suggest they believed the properties they held to have been a reward from a grateful Government for the services they had given the State. No doubt this view was reinforced by the Government's decision to waive interest repayments in the first eighteen months and to allow men of little or no capital to take up properties. Those first demands of interest no doubt created consternation amongst many settlers.

Hurst believed that unless something was soon done then the State could only expect to suffer huge losses as soldiers increasingly opted to leave their properties when unable to meet their interest commitments. Better, argued Hurst, to keep the soldiers on the land than to allow them to leave. Either way the State faced a heavy financial responsibility. To this end Hurst moved to reschedule the rates of interest. The original Act allowed for an interest free period after which soldiers were expected to pay interest of 5% on loans. Hurst believed that to ask soldiers to pay 5% interest immediately after their interest free period was unreasonable. Better, he suggested, to gradually raise the rate of interest to 5% over five years then hold it at that level for a further two years. Hurst proposed the settlers then pay interest at 5 ¹/₂% for the next twelve years to compensate the State for lost interest. After that time interest should return to 5% for the duration of the loan.^{59A}

Hurst's proposal was rejected by the Government. Minister for Lands and Works, Alexander Hean, argued that acceptance of Hurst's proposal would cost the taxpayers £120 000, and this on top of the £200 000 recently borrowed to help fund the scheme. Hean further argued that if the Government agreed to the recommendation it would only result in a paltry saving of £23 to each settler. He believed the cost of redrawing the soldier's contracts alone could not justify such a small saving. While Hean acknowledged Hurst's proposal was designed to help the State's finances as much as the soldiers' interest he reminded Parliament that "the Government had never looked upon this as a payable business proposition: although it was endeavoured as far as possible to run it on business lines."⁶⁰ While rejecting Hurst's proposal the Government did offer to provide some financial relief and proposed that the time for

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, August 31 1921.

repayment of loans on stock and buildings be extended from five to 25 years. Hean claimed this would reduce a settler's repayment on an average loan of £300 from £75 to £30 a year. Of course Hurst's move had come at a most inopportune moment for government. As a result of the collapse of the rural sector the State's economy was rapidly sliding into recession - if not depression.

But E. F. B. Blyth warned the House that neither Hurst nor Hean had offered a solution that tackled the real cause of the problem - the high prices paid for the settlers' properties. Blythe argued that unless this issue was speedily addressed the State faced calamity over resettlement. He reminded Parliament that out "of 47 men who had been settled on the Whiteford Hills no 1 and 2 in the past when things were normal, only six were successful, and how did they expect soldiers to make a success on this property when conditions were so abnormal."⁶¹

Throughout September debate on Hurst's motion continued. J. C. Newton claimed that:

The soldiers had started out on the land with the idea that all they had to do was to display sufficient energy and all would be well. However, during the last season all farms had a bad time but the soldiers were in a worse plight than the ordinary farmer. They were not as well equipped in the way of finance or of physical condition. They had been lured onto the land by the attractive pamphlets which had been distributed to them.⁶²

Newton assured Parliament that another season like the last would see the majority of settlers forced from the land.

Throughout the debate the Labor Party found itself sympathetic to Hean's proposal, believing it offered the settlers as good a deal as Hurst's. In supporting the Government, Leader of the Opposition, J. A. Lyons noted that but for Hurst's efforts little would have been done to help the men despite the fact that "it was known for some time that the soldiers were up against it."⁶³ Lyons believed there would soon come a time when the whole issue of soldier resettlement would have to be reexamined.

Hean's motion to alter the Act was accepted. Repayments on advances

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*, September 7 1921.

⁶³ *ibid.*

on stock and seed were now to be repaid over an eleven year period - the first twelve months to be interest free. Repayment of advances for buildings was to be over a 25 year period - the first five years interest free. Most members of the House were now in general agreement that the repatriation scheme was in trouble, its cost inevitably to be borne by the taxpayer. Happy to tamper with the scheme, Parliament was reluctant to take any decisive step to ensure its financial viability. Better perhaps to wait for improved economic circumstances to assist the settler's lot. The politicians found themselves in a dilemma: to help the soldiers might incur the wrath of the taxpayers who would have to foot the Bill, to act decisively and terminate the leases of settlers who were obviously failing would have led to a public outcry over the shabby treatment of its returned heroes. For any political party to have taken a clear stance on the issue would have invited electoral defeat. The whole situation seems to have neutralised the possibility of clear political action.

Indecision rarely offers solutions. In September 1921 Parliament yet again debated the increasingly perplexing problem of soldier settlement and, at Newton's insistence, established a Select Committee to investigate the matter. Newton was appointed Chairman of a Committee which included J. A. Hurst, W. H. Dixon, P. G. Pollard and William Sheridan. The Committee was asked to report upon the settlement and supervision of returned settlers, the advisability of cutting up Crown Lands under lease and on any improvements settlers may have made to their holdings. Over the next three months the Committee travelled the State interviewing 110 witnesses, 67 of whom were soldier settlers. It managed to hold meetings at both Cygnet and Franklin.

While Newton's Committee carried out its investigation the Labor Party moved a motion of no confidence in the Government's handling of the State's economy. The growing cost of soldier settlement figured prominently in debate. Lyons claimed that "there was no check upon expenditure in the Soldier Settlement Department"⁶⁴ and reiterated Labor's long held belief that the soldiers had been deceived. "Ministers knew very well, if they know anything about the possibilities of working the land at a profit, that their (soldiers) terms were millstones around

⁶⁴ *Mercury*, October 27 1921.

the neck of the Taxpayers and the soldier settlers."⁶⁵ Lyons argued that the Lee Government's aim had always been to protect the interests of the big landholders and the State's middlemen and called for stiffer taxes on land to bring property prices under control. "There was a tragedy ahead," warned Lyons, "if returned soldiers and others were put on estates and driven off because of high values. They could not go on as they had in the past - sit down and wait for the deluge to come."⁶⁶ Of course Lyons's comments broke no new ground. After all, such thinking had underpinned earlier Labor criticism of the soldier settlement scheme during debate on the original Bill in 1916 and 1917.

Lyons's motion of no confidence received strong support from fellow Laborites Robert Cosgrove and Albert Ogilvie. Cosgrove was convinced the Newton Committee's report would once and for all determine that too high a price had been paid for the settlers' properties. It was this, claimed Cosgrove, that explained the government's coolness towards the Committee's activities.

Naturally under these circumstances the Premier would regard the activities of a select committee on Soldier Settlement with coolness. Ministers knew they had made a mess of soldier settlement. Increased expenditure would be necessary but it was desired to hush things up.⁶⁷

Ogilvie's comments amplified Lyons's claims that the struggling settlers were unlikely to receive assistance from a government that had, as its primary aim, the furtherance of business interests. After all, claimed Ogilvie:

it was impossible for the one Government to represent Sir Henry Jones and the small farmer. Instead of being called a Nationalist Government it should be called an I.X. L. Government. Everywhere they went they found Sir Henry Jones and when the Government wanted an Agent-General they appointed his colleague Mr Ashbolt.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *Examiner*, October 27 1921.

⁶⁶ *Mercury*, October 27 1921.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, October 28 1921.

Such criticism was no doubt well based. Brown's⁶⁹ analysis of Jones's interlocking business interests certainly gives credibility to Ogilvie's claims. Indeed the belief in Jones's overwhelming influence on government had been, after all, the main impetus behind most of the planned developments in the Huon both before and after the war. It will no doubt be remembered that the P. H. F. C.'s main aim was in fact the breaking of Jones's monopoly over the state's fruit industry.

Lee steadfastly rejected the Labor Party's claims. He argued that all his government's attempts to assist settlers had been undermined by the present worldwide downturn in trade, a situation he held to be the major cause of all the State's difficulties. But Lee's defence of the Soldier Settlement Department did little for his argument. Lee claimed that "some of the men who had gone on the properties would never succeed if put on the best properties in the country. They had no adaptability for farming."⁷⁰ When asked why there had been no inquiry into the suitability of settlers Lee could only reply that "the position was that a man came back from the war and wanted to go on the land. He had to be given an opportunity. The Soldier Settlement Board made every investigation possible."⁷¹ Lee's comfortable majority allowed him to brush the censure motion aside. Would that it were as easy to brush aside the truth.

The Newton Committee's report of December 1921 proved highly critical of the Board's operations. While conceding that the Board had attempted an exercise unique in Tasmanian experience and with the added difficulty of attempting to settle men who were scarred both physically and mentally, the Committee argued that a better performance might have been expected. Significantly the Committee placed great emphasis on the physical and mental condition of the settlers, believing such conditions had proved an impediment to successful settlement, the first public acknowledgement of such a fact. Early in its report the Committee, in outlining the reasons for the resettlement scheme, claimed it had in part been established so that "settlers should be given a fair and reasonable start in civil life after the strenuous and nerve-wracking experience in the late war, and also to

⁶⁹ Brown, *I Excel.*, "passim."

⁷⁰ *Mercury*, October 28 1921.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

some extent compensate for the sacrifice made for the State and Empire."⁷² The Committee returned to the issue of disabled men when discussing the inflationary effect of the Board's purchasing policy, noting that in very many cases the value of properties had risen to such an extent that even despite the high value of primary products then being received "settlers who were physically fit would only have...a medium chance of making good."⁷³

Newton and his fellow Committee members criticised the Local Advisory Boards. They agreed their appointment was in theory a sensible step and that in some areas of the State these Boards had carried out their duties in a responsible manner. But the Committee found that in too many cases the Local Advisory Boards had proved incompetent and had helped inflate the price of land. The Committee also believed a number of properties they had recommended were unsuitable for soldier settlement. As the Committee commented:

While the Local Advisory Boards were, in some districts, a very great help to the Department in arriving at fair values, in other districts the values placed on properties were above those of the Government, and too often a compromise was made between the exalted local valuation and that of the Department.⁷⁴

Of course the Committee felt the Government's own valuers had often proved less than helpful. They too had often recommended properties at too high a valuation or in too poor a condition.

The report made special reference to orcharding properties, suggesting many when purchased had been old and worn out and that men taking them up found it difficult to make a living. The report claimed "the system of settling orchardists is far from satisfactory either to the settler or to the Department...and orcharding properties purchased...cannot be expected to afford a living to the soldiers or to return interest to the Department."⁷⁵

The *Mercury* was highly critical of the Committee's report. The paper claimed that the money spent on travelling had been a waste, and

⁷² Returned Soldiers' Settlement: Report of a Select Committee, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXV 1921-1922, Paper No 62.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

questioned the impartiality of those who had given evidence and the competency of the Committee's members. The paper commented:

even at the risk of giving offence, we are compelled to say that we do not consider that the members comprising the committee are capable of dealing with so big and comprehensive a question and we cannot believe that Parliament will accept their conclusions as they stand without ample confirmation.⁷⁶

The *Mercury* believed Parliament had only given consent to the Committee's establishment because many members of Parliament "did not like to oppose the motion for fear of being considered unsympathetic to the soldiers."⁷⁷ For the *Mercury* the situation was simple: those soldiers who wouldn't make a go of it couldn't be saved and those who would be successful needed no help. In between, the paper argued, were soldiers who needed some assistance "made up of those who have had bad seasons or losses due to special cases."⁷⁸

The *Examiner* was more nervous than critical. It felt the report to be a serious indictment of past practices and claimed that "for the most part the soldier could realise his dream of going on to a particular farm only by paying more than the market value, and thus consented to carry a millstone around his neck."⁷⁹ While admitting that a percentage of failures was to be expected the paper still felt that:

we cannot help being nervous on the score of the percentage of success. This report is most disquietening. If the position is really as the report states it cannot be allowed to continue. There must be radical changes. The whole business will have to be put on a much sounder footing. And the sooner the better.⁸⁰

The Newton Committee recommended wide ranging changes to the process of soldier settlement. The most significant of these was that the settlers, unless shown to have been negligent, should have their arrears capitalised from January 1 1921, the interest on such arrears to be paid at a rate of 4% for the next five years. The Committee also recommended that only 4% interest be levied on properties purchased at

⁷⁶ *Mercury*, December 14 1921.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Examiner*, December 14 1921.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

inflated prices, that a permanent system of supervisors be established to provide settlers with proper advice on the management of their properties and that in the case of properties considered too small to support a man and his family the settler be given extra land, either from the subdivision of other properties or the allocation of bush runs on Crown Lands. That the Committee used Government figures to support its arguments added strength to its recommendations. When these figures showed that only 36.5% of the monies owed by settlers had been paid by October 31 1921 it was clear something needed to be done.

In January 1922 Newton's report was debated in the House of Assembly. Minister Hean was quick to attack its findings. He claimed the Committee had misunderstood the State's financial agreement with the Federal Government, believed its attacks on the Advisory Boards to have been misdirected and criticised the way in which its statistics had been gathered. Hean suggested it would be impossible to implement many of the Committee's financial recommendations and defended the Board, pointing out that only 40 to 50 of the 1 400 properties under its control had been shown to have been negligently purchased. Hean believed the real problem with soldier settlement lay in the downturn in farm income, a downturn which affected the whole of the community, not just the soldier settlers. Such criticism met little sympathy among fellow parliamentarians.

Hurst, a Committee member, claimed Hean was deliberately understating the seriousness of the situation and suggested that unless something was soon done fully 70% of settlers would be forced to vacate their properties. He assured parliament that if it adopted the Committee's recommendations then that failure rate would drop to a figure between ten and twelve percent. Not surprisingly Newton too disagreed with Hean's criticisms, warning of imminent disaster if the recommendations were not adopted. Newton reiterated the major finding of the Committee; that too high a price had been paid for many of the properties, especially those which had involved Local Advisory Boards. He told Parliament that after investigating one such overvalued property he had advised the settler to "pack up immediately, take the next train and get away."⁸¹

There was a decided air of pessimism in the House of Assembly's

⁸¹ *Mercury*, January 18 1922.

debate over Newton's report. Most believed soldier settlement to be in trouble; the soldiers clearly needed help but there was uncertainty among members as to the level of assistance that might be offered. R. E. Snowden argued that as the taxpayer must eventually bear the added cost of resettlement he should be told so now. To delay the inevitable was stupidity on the part of Government. J. T. H. Whitsitt was adamant that responsibility for the scheme lay with the Commonwealth and urged the State's federal representatives to take the issue up with the Prime Minister. Whitsitt was scathing in his criticism of J. H. Carruthers, father of the "million farms" scheme. Whitsitt suggested anyone able to fund a successful resettlement scheme on money borrowed at 6% should be crowned King of Australia; he attacked the high interest rates levied on the settlers. Even in good times the capable farmer found difficulty in meeting interest demands of 4% - what chance the settler in the present economic climate meeting interest repayments of 5%. In Whitsitt's opinion Committees such as Newton's served only a limited purpose - what was needed was a Royal Commission.

At the end of January Parliament was thrown into uproar when the Minister for Agriculture, J. B. Hayes, accused Newton of having used his parliamentary position to influence valuations on certain properties. Hayes's accusation was based on information received from one of the Government's own Fruit Experts, J. M. Ward, who claimed Newton had "used his political influence to secure a higher price for certain property than recommended by the Government valuers."⁸² Ward had claimed such practice to be widespread and persistent among politicians, many of whom regularly attempted to gain higher valuations for properties belonging to one of their constituents. Indeed Ward claimed to have regularly met the then Minister, Alex Hean, to discuss the possibility of increasing the Board's valuation on a number of properties. Ward claimed he "had full opportunity of perusing the letters asking for such increases."⁸³ Ward was convinced political interference had led to the higher prices paid for much of the land.

Newton's defence was that he had only written to Hean on those occasions when the Board had ignored the advice of the Local Advisory Board, a situation he claimed often undermined the good work being

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *The World*, January 31 1922.

done by such bodies. He claimed that his letters merely suggested various valuers meet to discuss their differences and that they were in no way attempts to influence the purchase price on any property.

Hurst, having seen the letter upon which Ward's claims had been based, declared Newton's interpretation correct. He believed Hean's accusations were part of an orchestrated attack on the Committee's findings and claimed the attack to have been instigated by the *Mercury*, that long-time apologist for National Party policy. No doubt Hurst's claims were at least partly motivated by the *Mercury's* suggestion that he stood to gain financially from any implementation of the Committee's findings. Certainly his denial of such a suggestion bespoke contempt for a paper that "when the lists of casualties were coming through from Gallipoli, doubled its rates for the death notices of soldiers."⁸⁴ Towards the end of January, Hurst moved that funding for Hean's amendments to the Soldier Settlement Act be reduced by one pound. The success of such a move would of course necessitate parliament's adoption of that more wide-ranging revaluation recommended by the Newton Committee. Lee vehemently opposed the move. One pound or £10 000, it made no difference to him. If Hurst's amendment were accepted there was still no way the State could afford the £200 000 revaluation would cost. It was not right, warned Lee, for Parliament to "tinker" with the Government's economic policy.

Initially the House divided equally over Hurst's motion but it was lost when the Chairman of Committees' voted with the Government. On remark that such a step was improper, the motion was resubmitted and passed. The Government had been defeated on the floor of the House. Lyons immediately moved a motion of no confidence but without the support of Independent J. T. H. Whitsitt the move must be seen only as a gesture on Lyon's part. Whitsitt was prepared to vote with the Labor Party when necessary but was not prepared to force the Nationals from office. He had little sympathy for the Lee Government but less for the Labor Party and its socialist philosophy.

Hean's amendments lost, Whitsitt moved the adoption of the Newton Committee's recommendations. R. E. Snowden warned there was a real danger the soldiers might be dragged into the political arena. He for one

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

did not wish to see the politicisation of repatriation. The Labor Party believed the soldiers had been "dragged in long ago"⁸⁵ and at their own instigation, because they now realised the only way to attain their rights was through parliamentary action.

The Nationals still faced the consequences of adopting Newton's recommendations. Lee claimed any general revaluation of soldiers' holdings would be matched by a decline in the value of all farming properties. He suggested many soldiers had got themselves into their present difficulties because of their desire for big houses and outbuildings and their incessant demands for more generous advances to fund such developments. Lee was dismayed that they would now attempt to renege on their obligations. Even if the Government endorsed general revaluations the cost to the taxpayer and the limited benefits to be derived by the settlers would not provide a sufficient justification. Lee warned the longer the issue was debated the more costly the scheme would become as many soldiers were withholding their payments until Parliament made a final decision.

Hurst felt Lee's arguments ridiculous and suggested present anomalies in the system necessitated general revaluation. Why was it, Hurst asked, that civilians were able to take up properties, vacated by soldier settlers, at much lower rentals? How could the Government refuse to revalue original leases but relet vacant properties at lesser rentals to civilian tenants?

Lee argued lower rentals were necessary. Vacant properties, especially orchards, lost value rapidly and it was important that tenants be found quickly so that taxpayers interests might be protected. He reminded Parliament that the Board already held properties which had lost value after their being left vacant too long and suggested it would be absurd to "reduce the undeteriorated properties similarly."⁸⁶

These long held fears over soldier settlement continued throughout 1922, the issue frequently the subject of parliamentary debate. Some believed the Commonwealth had abrogated its responsibility in the matter; others that the State Government had proved impossibly incompetent in administration. All though realised that something needed to be done else the State faced economic ruin.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, February 1 1922.

J. A. Jensen, a former member of the Labor Party but now an Independent, was highly critical of the government's purchasing policies. He suggested:

all the money spent on Repatriation was absolutely due to the returned soldiers, but the way it had been spent was wrong, and the method of carrying out the Repatriation scheme had not been the best. The fertility had gone from most of the land, and it had been artificially manured. In many cases the Government had purchased from the father on behalf of the son, and the money had remained in the family whether the son remained on the land or not.⁸⁷

Such criticism was not without foundation, especially in an area like the Huon where, it will be remembered, some 67% of properties had been purchased from family or friends. While this fact was never acknowledged publicly by Lee there can be no doubt he was aware of the situation. Indeed, it may have even played a not insignificant role in his continued reluctance to grant general revaluations to the settlers. After all, when a settler purchased a property from his family it often meant the family kept the property while acquiring useful capital. Certainly the Huon settlers' files show that many of them received substantial financial help from their families - money no doubt derived from the "sale" of these properties. Revaluations, from Lee's point of view then, must in many cases have merely appeared to be nothing more than a further payment to a settler who had already received much from his artificial "purchase" of a property and offered no benefit to those soldiers in need.

Peter Murdoch, like Jensen, was equally critical of the government's manner of acquiring properties.

He claimed "the Government was sending men around the country assessing local values who knew nothing about the work," and suggested, "he would rather his boys be in gaol than on some of the land which had been provided for returned soldiers."⁸⁸ Murdoch claimed some of the people involved in such purchases to be speculators whose actions had cost the State and the settlers dearly.

In June 1922 the state went to the polls. While the Nationalists were returned to office they did so only through the support of what was soon

⁸⁷ *Mercury*, February 28 1922

⁸⁸ *ibid*, August 2 1922.

to be an increasingly disaffected Country Party. Indeed, in early August the leader of the Country Party, E. F. B. Blyth, moved a motion of no confidence in Lee's economic management.^{88A} The Government's continued difficulties with soldier settlement yet again figured prominently in debate.

Although the no-confidence motion was defeated it is clear that the debate seriously unsettled the confidence of many coalition members and J. B. Hayes soon replaced Lee as Premier. Given the State's economic difficulties and the uncertainty of Country Party support, Hayes's coalition Government was fragile.

By 1923 the Hayes' Government considered the settlement of returned men to be complete. The portfolio of Minister for Lands and Soldier Settlement was abolished and responsibility for soldier settlement returned to the Minister for Lands and Works, Edward Hobbs. Hobbs claimed the main work now facing the Board to be the evening out of any anomalies which might have crept into the system.⁸⁹ In an attempt to overcome these anomalies the Board, acting in its capacity of Board of Review, instituted a series of investigations into the difficulties that still confronted many of its settlers. When the Board was satisfied a settler had a genuine grievance it offered him either a remission of rent or interest, a reduction in rental or a temporary suspension of arrears on rental for periods ranging from two to ten years. But there would be no revaluations. Hobbs believed a general revaluations of all soldier settlement properties would have placed too large a burden on an already financially strained government. The Board, long an opponent of any revaluation, was not surprisingly fully supportive of Hobbs's position. But there were many who disagreed with both Hobbs and the Board. J. A. Hurst was one such individual.

A former member of the Newton Committee Hurst had become increasingly convinced that only a general revaluation would save the resettlement scheme from complete failure. Consequently, at Lyons's instigation, Hurst moved in early 1923 for yet another select committee to inquire into the costs and appropriate administrative procedures necessary for a complete revaluation of soldier settlement properties. Such a move was welcomed by those who believed the situation of most settlers to have grown desperate.

⁸⁹ Ministerial Statement of the Minister for Lands and Works, Edward Hobbs., T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXIX 1923-24, Paper No 14.

The *Examiner* for one was convinced the situation had now reached crisis point and that the time had come to expose the duplicitous behaviour of both government and settler. The editor claimed the government's accounting procedures were designed to keep the real cost of settlement from the public, its Board reports presented in such a way as to portray the scheme in the best possible light, and urged the adoption of a more business-like approach to resettlement. "It has too long," railed the editor, "been the plaything of politicians."⁹⁰ The paper suggested it was time the government finally placed fair values on settlers' properties, wrote them down at taxpayers' expense and allowed the settlers to either succeed or fail as the case may be.

But there was though a certain smugness about the *Examiner's* position. While it clearly believed the Hurst Committee promised the genuine settlers a real hope of success it was convinced that it would also expose those settlers who had simply been using the system to their advantage - and that at taxpayers' expense. The editor readily supported Lee's claims that:

some soldiers in arrears sent their children to private boarding schools, and always rode first class on the railway. Those could pay the Government instalments if they liked, but it was obvious that they would not pay whilst there seemed a chance of Parliament agreeing to pile the liability on the already seriously accumulated losses in soldier settlement.⁹¹

The Hurst Committee was appointed in March 1923 and comprised Hurst as Chairman, Minister for Lands E. F. B. Blyth, Frank Marriot, J. A. Lyons the Leader of the Opposition and J. H. Cleary. The Committee's report proposed the division of the state into six districts along the lines of the Board's earlier decision of September 1922. It was suggested each district have its own Board composed of local men, representatives of the R. S. L. and the local Board Inspector, to investigate applications for remissions of rent and interest and inquire into those cases where properties had been over valued at the time of purchase. It was also proposed that a central Board be established in Hobart to adjudicate disputes between these local Boards and the Minister. The Committee believed the Boards would cost the taxpayer

⁹⁰ *Examiner*, March 3 1923.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

£4 329 annually and although it was considered likely 1 000 settlers would seek remissions it was felt only 125 would, on the evidence it had gathered, qualify for such assistance.⁹²

The *Examiner* greeted the Committee's report with disdain, due mainly to its failure to recommend a general revaluation of settlers' properties. It was also highly critical of the Committee's proposal to establish six separate Boards to handle settlers' complaints. Better, the paper argued, to establish one central Board for "a general invitation to appeal to half a dozen Boards which may treat similar cases in half a dozen different ways does not strike....as a solution to the problem."⁹³ In the *Examiner's* view these six Boards only added complexity to an already unnecessarily complicated system.

Hurst was also highly critical of his own Committee's recommendations. He remained convinced that the settlers' only hope lay in a general revaluation but accepted his Committee's report on the ground that it at least offered the settlers some hope. Most parliamentarians, while in accord with Hurst's views, were also reluctantly forced to accept the Committee's recommendations.

But the critics had no need to worry. Hayes's move to introduce a Bill embodying the Hurst Committee's recommendations was overtaken by political events. In August 1923 he was forced from office, the victim of a hostile backbench grown disillusioned at his inability to solve the State's economic difficulties. Hayes was no doubt relieved to be able to take up the vacated senate seat of T. J. Bakhap. Lee, at Hayes's connivance, now found himself Premier again. The Bill was soon forgotten in the ensuing political turmoil and the Board was left free to carry out its own unconvincing attempts at revaluation.

In September Lee faced renewed criticism over the government's management of soldier settlement. Lyons, in what by now had become near ritual, believed the government's continued mismanagement of the scheme to epitomise the poor manner in which the State's finances were being run. He told parliament the time had come for Government to face the issue before it was too late. He suggested the government was totally responsible for the settlers' plight because it had so seriously

⁹² Returned Soldiers' Settlement: Report of a Select Committee, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXVII 1922-1923, Paper No 60.

⁹³ *Examiner*, March 22 1923.

underestimated the number of men who would wish to take up properties. Such a situation, so Lyons claimed, had then been aggravated by the government's cost cutting decision to cease retraining schemes which had virtually forced returned men to take up properties. Peter Murdoch too told parliament it was time the State "squared the ledger." He suggested "the future as regarded the settlement (of soldiers) was not going to be better than the past. The Government was selling places and was not getting as much for them as it had given."⁹⁴ Tasmania must be prepared to pay increased taxes to reduce the State's debts. The Nationalists had continually rejected such an option preferring instead to reduce Government expenditure.

In October Lee:

stunned Tasmania when he announced retrenchments in the public service, abolition of the agent-general's office in London, reduction in the number of members in Parliament, introduced fees for high school students and abolition of medical inspections and dental clinics for schoolchildren.⁹⁵

A proposal to increase taxation severed relations with long time Nationalist supporters. It was too much. In discussion over budget estimates C. W. Grant, E. F. Blyth and Peter Murdoch crossed the floor and voted with the Labor Party. The Lee government fell. Joseph Lyons now became Premier of a State disunited, debt ridden and facing financial and personal disaster over soldier settlement.

The most urgent problem the Lyons' government faced when taking office was the management of the Tasmanian economy. The depression that had set in by 1920, the economic ineptitude of successive Nationalist governments and Federal legislation relating to tariffs and the Navigation Act, all combined to bring Tasmania's economy to a parlous state. Orchardists in particular had experienced extremely difficult times. But the main factor driving Tasmania towards bankruptcy was undoubtedly the continued failure of its soldier settlement scheme.

Lyons's first act on taking office was the preparation of a special case in support of a claim for financial assistance from the Federal Government. This memorandum, tabled in Parliament on November 30

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Robson, *A History of Tasmania Vol II*, pp.391-392.

1923,⁹⁶ clearly showed the cost of soldier settlement was driving the state to the economic brink.

The memorandum described "the position of the State Treasury in regard to soldier settlement (as) extremely serious."⁹⁷ Lyons suggested the sole responsibility for this state of affairs lay with the Commonwealth Government which had induced the state during the early years of the war to accept too great a responsibility for soldier settlement. In Lyons's view Tasmania's present economic crisis was the result of the Commonwealth's abrogation of responsibility for soldier settlement. Lyons misread the situation. At those conferences the states, ever mistrustful of any expansion of Commonwealth powers, had strongly stressed the idea of state's rights and had forced the Commonwealth Government to allow them to administer the scheme. Such a stand on Tasmania's part had cost the state dearly. No doubt the states at that time believed such an agreement promised access to overseas funds, such access having been denied them from the commencement of hostilities. Monies ostensibly received for soldier settlement might possibly be used to continue the funding of large scale developments within the states. As Kent Fedorowich has shown⁹⁸ it was just this promised access to overseas funds that encouraged the Australian states to allow for the settlement of Imperial soldiers and presumably the same attitudes held sway at a more local level. In a very real sense then the Tasmanian government's decision to uphold State's rights had brought about the present financial crisis.

The memorandum specifically noted the role patriotism had played in the present crisis: "There was at the time throughout Australia an impulse of generosity which carried Governments, as well as individuals, somewhat out of their depths."⁹⁹ But by late 1923 this patriotism had placed a millstone around the State's financial neck: by the end of June 1923 the deficit on soldier settlement had reached £232 000.^{99A} That the government had been forced to raise £500 000 to cover its immediate

⁹⁶ Memorandum in Support of Tasmania's Claim to Special Consideration from the Parliament of the Commonwealth., T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXIX 1923-1924, Paper No 74

⁹⁷ *ibid*.

⁹⁸ K. Fedorowich, "The assisted emigration of British ex-servicemen to the Dominions, 1914-1922", *Emigrants and Empire* (Manchester 1990)

⁹⁹ Memorandum in Support of Tasmania's Claim., *op cit*.

responsibilities had not helped. As Lyons warned, when the Commonwealth rebate on soldier settlement ceased "the State's position will become utterly impossible."¹⁰⁰

The reports of the Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Department for the period 1920 - 1925 present an equally depressing picture. There were continued references to "the alarming increase in the number of voluntary surrenders"¹⁰¹, of the need to write off debts totalling £87 990¹⁰² and to the worsening financial situation of many settlers. By June 1924 over 300 settlers throughout the state owed the Department more than £150 each.¹⁰³ The Department's reports offered little hope of improvement. Indeed, over a two year period between 1922 and 1924, 512 leases had been cancelled¹⁰⁴ and the Board, now justifiably regarding itself as the largest real estate agent in Tasmania, was finding difficulty in either selling or leasing the vast number of vacant properties it now held. Each of these cancellations or surrenders added further to the State's burden of debt.

The government's attempts to sell or lease unwanted assets demonstrated it was most unlikely to recoup even a small amount of monies spent on their purchase. Auctions of stock and equipment also provided small comfort. Those held in the Huon between February and June 1923 only managed to realise some £948.¹⁰⁵ Small though it may have been it was still an amount far in excess of that earned by the majority of settlers on their orchards in the Huon. It is to their particularities that we must now turn.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Department: Report for 1922-1923, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXIX, 1923-1924, Paper No 21.

¹⁰² Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Department: Report for 1923-1924, T. J. P. P., Vol XCI, 1924-1925, Paper No 13

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Department: Report for 1922-1923, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXIX, 1923-1924, Paper No 21.

Chapter Seven.

The Huon Settlers' Experiences: 1919-1925.

That soldier settlement in the Huon proved disastrous is beyond dispute. Some 60%^{1A} (65) of settlers left their properties between 1919 and 1925 - their average period of resettlement lasting just a mere two years and seven months.² Some left voluntarily but the majority had little choice. That the scale of the disaster was widely and early recognised has already been noted previously. Parliament, mainly through the efforts of the Newton and Hurst inquiries, did at times attempt to redress the settlers' difficulties but such efforts were necessarily compromised by political and economic considerations and generally extended rather than resolved a settler's difficulties. The Board's own varied attempts to reorganise a settler's debt too often only served to delay the inevitable and increase the ultimate burden to the taxpayer. Any attempts to rectify faults in what was at heart a fundamentally flawed scheme had necessarily to fail. While government action, well intentioned or not, often only exacerbated the settlers' problems, there were other, perhaps more significant factors, which led to their exodus.

A settler's failure often stemmed from his choice of property - or as many critics argued, his lack of choice. The productive capacity of many properties was small - too small to provide a settler with an income sufficient to provide both a living and pay rent and interest. While many such properties had been purchased in the expectation that a settler might derive income from local employment the depression in the Huon rendered such a proposition impossible. Many properties suffered from specific problems such as ease of access, distance to wharves or non-commercial varieties of fruit. Nearly all properties suffered the ravages of "Black Spot".

Health was yet another factor that forced many settlers to leave their properties. Many settlers who declared themselves fit upon their return were often soon suffering the delayed physical and psychological consequences of war. Their failing health denied them any opportunity

² Figure derived from AB19 Files.

of working their properties effectively. Of course it must be conceded that there were some who never had any intention of working their properties at all.

But undoubtedly the most significant cause of failure stemmed from the collapse of the fruit industry in the early 1920s.^{2A} The high cost of transport and lack of shipping space, continued poor seasons, the machinations of prominent businessmen such as Henry Jones, increased competition from South African and North American growers and the continued refusal of Federal assistance all conspired to make the growers' position impossible. It was a situation beyond the control of either the growers or the state government. It was not long before such tragedy was manifest in the settlers' experiences. The following pages present the grim story at grass roots level.

Within months of settling on his property at Ranelagh a disillusioned Russel Ayres had written a letter to the Board which anticipated the widespread complaint of many. Before the war Ayres had been a farm labourer in the Huon, as such conversant with local conditions, but within twelve months he found himself in debt, unable to meet repayments on interest let alone principle. The need to build a house added to his indebtedness but the poor returns on fruit in his first season assured from the outset his position would be untenable. Ayres' letter refuted any suggestion of incompetence on his part. He claimed his present position had resulted from the poor business sense of the Board, the collapse of the English fruit market, and the low returns that then prevailed for small fruit.

When the Board purchased the property it had done so on the understanding that it produced four tons of small fruit and 1 000 to 1 200 bushels of apples a year. Even after improvements Ayres claimed it produced no more than two tons of small fruit and only six to 700 bushels of apples. This serious underestimation of the property's productive capacity when linked to the high returns that prevailed at the time of purchase meant it had been greatly overvalued. Even if the returns on fruit had not fallen so dramatically it was clear Ayres would experience difficulty in meeting his commitments. As well, Ayres claimed the property's viability to be threatened by the lack of a good road which made "it ... almost impossible for (him) to remove(his) produce at

times."³ The local council was unwilling to provide assistance. No doubt local councils felt little responsibility in providing services to soldier settlers who were initially not required to pay rates on their properties. Of course the loss of such rates hampered a council's ability to provide such services.

The returns from the English market proved disastrous and Ayres, like other growers, was forced to rely on income derived from small fruit. But small fruit returned a mere penny halfpenny a pound. After the cost of manuring and picking he received "nothing, and my holding is allowing no profits at all until the markets improve."⁴ Ayres claimed that as the government had placed soldiers on such unremunerative properties it had responsibility to find new markets for the fruit and to give assistance in terms of marketing and freight. He did not expect to receive much help and claimed the attitude of the Tasmanian Government was to "help yourself or go without."⁵ Like many growers, soldier settler or otherwise, Ayres was convinced that the only hope lay in the move to co-operation. He urged the Board to use its influence to pressure the government to give assistance to the state's new co-operatives, such as the P. H. F. C. "Like myself there are a good many soldiers in it, & it is a hard fight for us, as the other firms are out to beat us, but if this was done it will be a bad day for soldier settlement."⁶ Such comments were soon reinforced by other settlers who complained to the Board about the difficulties they faced over the inflated valuations on their properties, their poor returns for fruit and the lack of assistance provided by government.

In 1920 Alex Woods complained to the Board about the valuation of £1 000 on his property at Ranelagh, claiming the former owner had paid a mere 16s a year in land tax. For Woods such valuation showed the total disregard the government held for returned soldiers. "I thought," Woods told the Board, "it was the duty of all concerned to see we were not taken in this sort of thing and that we returned men were to be placed on such farm that we could work out a living on...if there is not some adjustment

³ AB19/2458.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

it will be impossible for me to even exist on this farm".⁷ Woods too had suffered poor returns on fruit which exacerbated his difficulties with overvaluation.

Now sir, when the time comes I will have to pay taxes on one thousand pounds when the property is not worth it. If I had to do so, I could not live on it. I have been here just over one year, and have worked the place well and my net returns have been seventy pounds for small fruit and twenty pounds and I cannot see anything more in it for years, so how can I pay taxes and capital and keep my wife and children out of this.⁸

Woods urged an immediate revaluation of his property, convinced it was the only hope he had. Despite intervention by the Huon R. S. L., he was forced to vacate his property at the end of 1921.

Like Ayres, George Woolley at Glen Huon faced a problem over roads - or the lack of them. His position was precarious as he had to cross private property over a bridle track to reach his holding. If the owner of the adjoining land barred access his position would be untenable. Of course the lack of an access road meant the crops he grew would be "worse then useless" to him.⁹ Woolley received his road but in 1932 was given fourteen days notice to vacate after his arrears had risen to £634.¹⁰

Despite the Board's awareness of such settlers' complaints its reports to Parliament, as noted earlier, continually sought to reassure. The Board constantly stressed the care taken when purchasing properties, assuring government that "in all cases the aim...was to secure good value as an investment for the State, and to acquire holdings capable of providing a living for a man."¹¹ The Board suggested those soldiers who left their properties did so because either the interest free period had expired or the soldier was not a "trier". The Board believed itself in no way responsible for the settlers' predicament and provided constant reassurance that the future of soldier settlement was secure. Its

⁷ AB19/771.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ AB19/2529.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Returned Soldiers and Closer Settlement Department Report for 1920-21, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXV, Paper No 37.

faith was that the present depression in the fruit industry would not last indefinitely and that the soldiers would eventually make good. The fact that 97 leases had been cancelled during the year seems not to have shaken the Board's confidence. The Board was not alone in such optimism. At the unveiling of the Franklin war memorial in 1921 W. H. Dixon had assured those present that while:

existing conditions for these diggers who had gone on the land might not be very bright...they were hopeful that as time went on these conditions would improve...Financially speaking they were in a very bad position but he was hopeful that in Tasmania there would be very little and perhaps no fresh taxation and that would be a relief to many people.¹²

Tasmania's bigger landowners no doubt gained solace from Dixon's comments but they offered little hope to the soldier settlers whose position continued to deteriorate. It was just this unwillingness on the part of the Lee Government to raise taxes that partially precluded any hope of financial assistance to the now hard pressed settlers.

As the world wide depression deepened its effects undermined the efforts of each settler in the Huon. In June 1922 Charles Armstrong received a demand for arrears of some £34 on his property at Cygnet. He could only inform the Board that he had "never been able to turn a pound off the place. It is nothing but hard work and no returns."¹³ Like so many other settlers Armstrong insisted his property had been a poor purchase. "There is nothing on it to encourage a man to work. There is nothing cleared or cultivated, only what I have done myself."¹⁴ Armstrong had been forced to work off the property just to keep his wife and family but this merely precluded the proper working of his own place. His only hope, so he claimed, was for the Board to grant a two year extension on his repayments.

In August Armstrong received a visit from the government Inspector who reported him to be a good worker only needing adequate supervision to overcome his difficulties. The Inspector claimed such difficulties to be principally related to the property itself as there was "practically no income from this property at time of purchase, so

¹² *Huon Times*, October 18 1921.

¹³ AB19/4226.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

Armstrong has had to work away and consequently has not had much chance of improving property."¹⁵ It was suggested that Armstrong's debts be capitalised for two years and that he only be asked to pay the lease on his home. This new financial arrangement offered little as it failed to address Armstrong's basic problem - his property was an uneconomic proposition. Unable to gain a living he was forced to surrender his lease in 1923, £942 in debt to the Board.

At Snake Plains Gordon Harding found himself in a similar position. After three years he had only managed to repay the Board £45 and was now £106 in arrears. In an attempt to gain some return the Board decided, against Harding's wishes, to sell off 20 acres of his property. Harding's reply was bitter:

I should like to ask you if you though it possible for me to meet the interest demanded close on two hundred pounds in three years in the neglected state the place was in when I cam on it. Do you think for one minute that you could do it and live keep your wife and family from starving. Whatever you produce you don't get your expenses out of it. Swede, turnips, two pound five shillings ton. Potatoes from three to five pounds a ton. It don't pay for the manure you use, let alone pay the interest on the place. I failed entirely with my English fruit never got enough out of them to clear expenses.¹⁶

Harding made much of the fact that even after years of hard work he might still lose his property because of "not being able to meet those nice little bills you are so often sending me."¹⁷ The Board was unimpressed: Harding was judged not to be a genuine "trier". In November 1922 the Board threatened to cancel Harding's lease unless he took immediate steps to improve his financial position and the condition of his property. He was given just seven days to reply. At the end of November Harding informed the Board he intended to leave the property in January 1923, or earlier "as I haven't made a cats living since I have been on it."¹⁸ But by mid-December 1922 he had surrendered his lease, his three year residency having cost the Board £1 311.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ AB19/1619.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Cyril Batchler of Cradoc offers yet a further example of the difficulties experienced by settlers at this time. He had taken up his property in the rush of 1919 and now, in 1922, following three bad seasons, was forced to ask the Board whether he might lease his property to a third party. Batchler, like so many others, blamed his lack of success on the Board's decision to purchase what he believed to be a poor property. As he told the Board in July "first years crop 448 c/ss, second 500, third, that is this year 750; a total for three years of 1698 c/ss. When I agreed to lease the property the owner told me that 1000 c/ss was the average crop. Had I got this amount I could have paid my way."¹⁹ Batchler was soon forced to reconsider his position following the receipt of a paltry 3s a case on his English fruit. The property was simply unpayable. Whether it produced the promised 1 000 cases a year was now immaterial. A 1 000 cases at 3s a case meant a return of only £150 "out of which I must spend on chaff (£15), spraying material (£15), repairs (£3) and interest (£6) about £100 leaving only £50 to live on."²⁰ To add to his difficulties Batchler was now fined for non-payment of Federal taxes. Like many returned soldiers, Batchler was under the impression that he had been granted an exemption from such taxes as part of his resettlement process. He bitterly noted that:

an influential resident told me I had made the mistake of improving the place and trying to crop a property totally unsuited to cropping when I ought to have just done my orchard work and went out to work the rest of the time as he had never known the place to pay anyone who owned it in the past.²¹

The litany of complaint continued. At the end of 1922 Arthur Heatly asked the Board whether he might surrender his property at Cradoc. He was convinced any further efforts on his part promised only a bleak future. He had already offered the property to a number of prospective purchasers but it had been consistently rejected on the basis that it was either too big for a local or too small for large scale farming. Heatly assured the Board his decision had not been made in haste:

I have give it a good go and by every way possible to make it pay,
But I now find under the conditions I have not got a chance. I can

¹⁹ AB19/691.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

grow the crops alright but when Harvest comes, and the selling of the produce, there is so much expense in getting it too market at the right time, not being in the possession to hold it and wait for the better prices.²²

Like so many others Heatly had been forced to work off the property but even so, as he told the Board "if it had not been for my pension I would have been out before this."²³ Heatly struggled along for a further three years until the Board finally cancelled his lease in 1925. He left the property owing £95 in arrears alone. Heatly, like Woods, Ayres, Batchler and Woolley, typified the settlers' experiences at this time. There was a common complaint about the inability of the properties to support a man and his family, a sense that soldier settlers had somehow been let down, promises not made good. The settlers believed their properties to be in most cases the major obstacle to success. They held themselves to be "triers" despite government Inspector's reports to the contrary. But even when a property met with a settler's approbation the collapse of international markets for fruit led to financial ruin. The returns on fruit did not allow the repayment of rent and arrears and often left little for the soldier and his family. The settlers were convinced that the government believed its responsibility ended with the purchase of the properties. Certainly their calls for help had been largely ignored by a government which appeared to be either incapable or unwilling to offer assistance. At times the Board attempted to find a solution to the settlers' financial difficulties through innovative interpretations of the Act - but such innovations, in most cases, merely delayed departure and substantially increased a soldier's level of indebtedness. Political realities necessitated the government place its faith in improved international trade rather than acknowledging it resettlement scheme to be fundamentally flawed. Of course any government seen to be evicting large numbers of soldier settlers, heavily in debt or otherwise, would be demonstrating a most remarkable lack of patriotism and the R. S. L. was ever ready to remind government of its patriotic responsibility. The difficulty for government lay in discovering a solution that necessitated the least expenditure on the part of the taxpayer. Consequently the settlers were left to seek salvation on

²² AB19/262.

²³ *ibid.*

properties which for many had become their Gardens of Gethemanie.

The Government's qualms had been partially overcome at the beginning of 1922 when it adopted the recommendations of the Newton Committee but the decision provided only limited relief to few settlers. Indeed, it may have exacerbated the situation. One consequence of Newton's report was the extension of advances to settlers. Those advances to June 1920 had totalled £143 885 but between June 1921 and June 1922 that figure nearly doubled to £204 800. The Board was soon nervous about such a dramatic increase in the level of settler indebtedness and became concerned at the way in which much of the money was being spent. President of the Board, G. C. Rudge noted that "to a greater extent than previously has advantage been taken by lessee to obtain advances on improvements in order to meet any arrears of rent, interest etc."²⁴ The fact that many settlers used these advances to repay debt forced their immediate curtailment. In 1922-23 £101 708 was allocated to advances: in 1923-24 £18 899. Of course the Board's innovative interpretation and the Government's adoption of the Newton Committee's recommendations were a mere panacea: if there was a solution to the settlers' difficulties then that solution was revaluation. But revaluation would have amounted to a tacit admission of fault on the government's behalf and necessitated increased levels of taxation. The solution was politically unacceptable.

The Board's decision to alter its system of inspection was yet a further attempt to aid settlers while providing greater protection to the State's interests. Strong emphasis had always been placed upon the Inspector's role, that "personal link" between the soldiers and the Department, but the rapid extension of advances now rendered such a role crucial. The Board replaced its old Inspectors, men recruited from local councils, with Inspectors appointed by the Board, each of whom was responsible for one of the six new districts into which the State was divided.²⁵ Qualification rather than interest was now the criterion for appointment as the Board adopted a more professional approach. But this increasing bureaucratization failed to produce a more "hard headed" business

²⁴ Returned Soldiers and Closer Settlement Department Report For 1921-22, I. J. P. P., Vol I XXXVII, 1922-23, Paper No 28.

²⁵ *ibid.*, Under this new system the Huon was referred to as District 4 and placed under the care of Inspector E. J. Jennings.

approach, if that had indeed been the aim, for in general the new Inspectors were themselves returned men, sympathetic to the settlers' plight. An unintended consequence of the reorganization was to be the increasing remoteness of the settlers from the Board, a remoteness that left the settlers more isolated than ever.

The new Inspectors were told to place special emphasis upon those settlers seen to be at risk²⁶ while those perceived to be successful were to be granted greater autonomy. The Inspector's role in encouraging as many settlers as possible to continue with their holdings was given special emphasis. Rudge informed parliament that such encouragement had "prevailed on the settler not to vacate his leasehold, and by judicious encouragement succeeded in getting him to try again, where otherwise he would have surrendered his lease, and consequently would have lost the opportunity which settlement on the land would have given him."²⁷ Of course this "judicious encouragement" Inspectors offered, helped ensure that the enormous difficulties under which the settler was labouring did not become too apparent to the wider community. The effect of such practise was to the loss that the state would ultimately have to accept. Certainly the number of cancellations increased markedly - some 285 settlers leaving their properties in 1922 alone. This meant the total number of vacated properties now stood at 626.

In yet a further attempt to help settlers the Board now made ready use of a 1917 amendment to the Soldier Settlement Act²⁸ which allowed a settler to sell off sections of his property. Such sales provided the settler with an immediate source of cash with which to meet repayments and lowered the interest on his property. While a large number of the Huon's settlers took advantage of this amendment, especially those who would ultimately prove successful, for the majority it simply meant the temporary deferment of their departure.²⁹

In April 1923 the government embarked upon the most notable of its many attempts to provide assistance to settlers when, at the instigation of the Hurst Committee, it introduced a Bill that allowed for limited

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Soldiers' Settlement Board: Report For 1917-18, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXIX, 1918-19, Paper No. 40.

²⁹ Information derived from a study of the AB19 Files on the Huon.

suspensions and remissions of arrears and selective revaluations of properties. Since the scheme's inception the Board had allowed for such measures but in an ad hoc and decidedly limited manner. Under Hurst's proposal the Board was to establish an independent Board of Review which would investigate settlers' complaints over valuations and unreasonable demands of interest. In this way it was hoped an independent adjudication might give some real relief to those in need, unhampered by the constraints of government policy. But unfortunately for the settlers, the change of government in October 1923 led to the deferment of such plans. In the interim, however, the Board decided to act as its own Board of Review. But its limited concessions only antagonised the settlers who had hoped for a great deal more.

In early 1922 the Board ceased purchasing properties. While the Act had established March 31 1922 as the endpoint for such purchases there was in fact no need anyway. The continued departures of settlers had obviated any necessity for purchases. The Board, now in possession of a large number of vacated properties, soon had no choice but to let them to civilian settlers. This led to acute embarrassment for both the Board and the Government and to a sense of injustice within the community. It also meant the state lost significant sums on rentals as civilians held their properties not under the Soldier Settlement Act but under the Tenants Act.

This Act ensured tenants of a flat rental and imposed added obligations upon the Board which was now required to repair and maintain buildings. The government, having rejected revaluation for so long, now found itself offering civilian settlers de facto revaluations: the soldiers forced to vacate properties due to excessive rents were understandably enraged by such decisions. The Board noted that:

complaints have been made in some quarters that civilians are paying less for properties than those charged to the soldier settlers, and this is correct in some cases, and is mainly the outcome of the neglect of many of the outgoing men. Neglect of orchard properties has had a depreciating effect on values, and allowances have to be made to endeavour to obtain more desirable tenants.³⁰

³⁰ Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Department Report For 1921-22, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXVII, Paper No 28.

The rental of these properties in the Huon caused anger and bewilderment among many. In September 1923 the Cygnet Council passed a motion rejecting such practise and wondered why "the offer had not been made to the soldiers to carry on at the lower rate instead of being turned off their properties."³¹ Such anger was perfectly understandable. The depression in the fruit industry had led most soldier settlers to despair and to see civilians take up properties at vastly reduced rentals only reinforced their sense of despair. The government appeared to have lost all interest in their plight.

The first report of the new District Inspector for the Huon, E. J. Jennings, highlighted such anger. He noted that the depression in the fruit industry, to which he saw no immediate end, was having "a depressing influence upon settlers in general, and is responsible for many of the settlers vacating their properties."³² Jennings conceded some settlers only remained on their properties for a year or so in an attempt to make as much as they could before vacating: but insisted the majority were triers, anxious to maintain their properties:

A lot of them are going out to work two or three days a week, other are wood-carting now and again, and every possible way of "keeping the pot boiling" is being utilised until prosperity grows brighter. But for these efforts on the part of a large number of settlers they would be faced with an unpromising future.³³

The report belied the Board's promise that each property would support a man and his family. To complicate matters, the worsening economic climate and the rapid rise in unemployment had left the soldiers with fewer opportunities for such work. Those special grants which had been provided by the Government to help the returned men, grants that had caused so much bitterness within the community, could not last forever. Jennings's report was not all doom and gloom. He was confident that when those men who were not triers or opportunists had left, the Board would realise its objective: "to successfully settle returned soldiers with farming knowledge, and give further impetus to the primary

³¹ *Huon Times*, September 11 1923.

³² Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Department Report For 1921-22, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXXVII, 1922-23, Paper No 28.

³³ *ibid.*

industries so necessary to lead our state to an era of prosperity."³⁴ Jennings was especially pleased to note:

that the old spirit of camaraderie so prevalent on active service, is still in great evidence among settlers. Socially, of course, no settler is regarded with any degree of distinction above his neighbours, and the same impartial treatment is maintained throughout. Most settlers have returned to their pre-war districts, and as a result they have merged into the social life of the community as friends of all.³⁵

It was just such interaction with the community that was to make the failure of the settlers more keenly felt by all.

Jennings' guarded hopes continued to be denied by the increasing difficulties faced by settlers. As outlined earlier, the depression in the fruit industry intensified between 1923 and 1924. The fruit returns continued, as the *Huon Times* so often noted, to be disastrous. Even a large scale exodus from the Huon failed to relieve the economic pressures upon those who remained. The area was infused with a deep sense of resignation: there was now little talk of progress or new developments. The failure of the High School, the closure of the Huon Timber Company and the refusal of either State or Federal governments to provide relief were symptomatic of the orchardist's difficulties. The Board's tentative steps towards the provision of remissions or revaluations did little to help the settlers' position. To add to their difficulties many settlers now experienced a break down in health.

It is difficult to determine the exact number of soldiers suffering ill-health though clearly the number was significant. The report of the Commonwealth Repatriation Commission for 1924-25 made reference to the growing illness amongst returned men, and referred to the "drastic change in numbers...in the percentage of certain medical disabilities."³⁶ Between 1921-22 and 1924-25 the incidence of respiratory disease grew from 6.1% to 19.2%, tuberculosis from 13.8% to 17.3%, heart disease from 4.1 to 8.7% and rheumatism from 3.6 to 5.3%³⁷ Many medical

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Commonwealth Repatriation Commission Report For 1924-25, C. P. P., Vol II, 1926-27-28., Paper No 69.

³⁷ *ibid.*

practitioners believed the physical effects of gassing and war time stress only became apparent after the passage of a number of years. Soldiers returning to Australia seemingly fit soon fell victim to latent war time injuries.^{37A} Many such men having taken up soldier settler properties now found it impossible to continue. The Board cannot be loaded with responsibility for this situation.

The original application forms had asked prospective settlers to list war time injuries and many did so, though the soldiers' perception of the term "wounded" did not include disease or gassing. When Charles Jackson completed his application form to the question "wounds" he answered "gassed, but no wounds."³⁸ The answer typified those of most. But one must suspect many judged such admission would prejudice their chances for a property though such a fear proved groundless: illness proved to be no barrier to the acquisition of a farm. The Board, when faced with these cases of ill-health, usually tried to find a way to allow the settler to continue.



Soldier Settler George page pulling stumps: early 1920s.

Ill-health contributed to Thomas Miller's departure from his property at Cygnet.³⁹ Originally in partnership with a Herbert Jones, by June 1922 the two, as was so often the case with partnerships, had a falling

³⁸ Lands And Surveys Department (LSD) 190/2/592

³⁹ AB19/4133

out. The Board ordered Inspector Harrison, the new Inspector for the Huon, to investigate the consequent dispute. He reported both men to be "poor types, and I really could not make a choice between them. At my suggestion a coin was tossed, with the result that Jones agrees to transfer his interest in the property to Miller."⁴⁰ Harrison rejected any idea of terminating the leases of both men on the ground that any new tenant would be sure to fail and so contribute to a bigger loss to the state. Clearly Harrison considered this case already hopeless.

In 1923 another Inspector reported that Miller had made no improvements and in 1924 the lease was cancelled. Then Miller asked the Board's help in seeking a better pension:

I beg to ask you as I am unable to do hard work of any class my property would of been worked only I am un able to do farm work.

I beg for you to help as to getting my pension rose. I have been put out and as had to take a dear house as there where no other empty rent is 11/- a week and my pension 7/- I cannot do hard work and there is no other going on at present.⁴¹

Miller's case was far from unique. G.Stansfield, an early returnee, had taken up his Ranelagh property in 1918. By 1923, due to an unspecified health problem, he was forced to relinquish it. To that point Stansfield had been managing reasonably well and reports had been favourable. No doubt Stansfield was somewhat luckier than Miller as the Board allowed his brother to take up the property and so he was able to retain some sense of possession. The practice of family members taking up properties vacated due to ill-health seems to have been wide-spread. While the Board's operations display little consistency there seems to have been a willingness, where possible, to allow this practice.

Leslie Stanton⁴² and James Howard⁴³ provide further cases in point. Stanton took up his property at Cradoc in 1920 but in 1922 his doctor ordered him to move to a drier and warmer climate. As he was to be away for twelve months the Board allowed him to sub-let his property for that period. Within a few months Stanton's wife informed the Board of her husband's death and requested she be allowed to take over the

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² AB19/390.

⁴³ AB19/2552.

property. The Board gave her a weekly tenancy. In 1924, however, Stanton's wife informed the Board that she could not continue the lease: the repayments were too high. She claimed the situation was so bad that even if the Board let her have the property interest free for twelve months she would still be unable to meet her expenses.

Unfortunately Mrs Stanton's all too brief appearance reflects the paucity of material which might throw light upon the role women played in resettlement. That they indeed played a most significant role must of course be beyond doubt for the labour of women and children was of vital necessity to the success of any small orchard. But in one area at least the settlers' files shed some light on one significant feminine role: much of the settlers' correspondence with the Board depended upon their literary skills. Such skills no doubt meant many women played an important role in the daily management of their husbands' orchards and as such shared a level of equality perhaps not shared by women in urban settings.

James Howard took up his property in 1919 but in March 1920 the Board received a letter from his doctor certifying he was "unfit for hard labour owing to war injuries."⁴⁴ Howard had purchased the property from his parents who had continued to live with him. They now worked the property while Howard was in Sydney. In 1925 the parents asked the Board whether they might purchase 32 1/2 acres of their son's property but the Board was unable to consider the request until Howard clarified his intentions. In January 1926 the parents offered to purchase the whole of the property. But the Board had already decided to cancel Howard's lease due to the non-payment of some £96 arrears. Howard's brother was now able to purchase the property on his parents' behalf.

The transfer of a lease or sale of a property to a relation was not the only option open to the Board when it attempted to help soldier suffering poor health. Douglass Burgess⁴⁵ had taken up a property at Ranelagh in 1920 but in 1922 was hospitalised in Hobart suffering bronchitis, emphysema and possibly tuberculosis. After a short stay in hospital Burgess returned to his property but was soon suffering poor health again. In July 1923 he asked whether he might be allowed to sub-lease his property for three years as his doctor had ordered him away

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ AB19/1303.

from the area. Burgess claimed he had:

been unable to do any work this last twelve months and have had to pay for all my work to be done...I dont want to give up my place because I put all my money into it. It is on account of ill health that has caused me to do this. It is not bluff by saying that I have to get away from here as I could show the Dr Cert if required.⁴⁶

The Board allowed Burgess to sub-lease his property. By 1934 he was in difficulty again and, with arrears of £493, was allowed to mortgage the property to the Port Huon Fruitgrowers Co-operative. By 1937 Burgess was some £67 in arrears. In 1938 he transferred the lease to his cousin.

Even when soldiers left the state, the Board was prepared to offer what assistance it could. James Davis ⁴⁷ had taken up a property at Franklin in 1921 but was forced to surrender the lease on grounds of ill-health in 1924. Having moved to the more benign climate of South Australia with the intention of grazing sheep he approached the Board for assistance in gaining a soldier settler property in that State. The Board was happy to supply a good reference:

During the three years Mr Davis effected considerable substantial improvements and worked the property to the complete satisfaction of the Closer Settlement Board...I have pleasure in stating that Mr Davis was a most satisfactory settler, and certainly met all the obligations imposed by his lease.⁴⁸

Not all soldiers suffering poor health received such treatment. William Glass⁴⁹ took up his Mountain River property in 1920 but in 1923, on his doctor's instructions, moved to a drier part of the state in an attempt to cure his neuritis, a condition that probably resulted from the amputation of a toe while on active service. In 1924 Glass was placed on a yearly lease but in 1927, now £480 in arrears, his lease was cancelled. The local Inspector, Russ Cairns, reported he had:

had this holding under notice for some time...& informed lessee if conditions did not alter I would have to recommend that his lease be cancelled. The property is in a very neglected state & lessee is always away at work on some road job or another. He had no

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ AB19/3092.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ AB19/2460.

possible hope of succeeding & makes no effort to improve his position.⁵⁰

It is clear from the above cases that the Board, when confronted by situations involving serious health problems, generally adopted a genuinely philanthropic attitude towards the settlers. Where possible it made every effort to maintain them on their properties. At least in some cases the government's actions were not simply the result of political or economic considerations. But for whatever reason, try as it might, the government could not stem the flow of departures. To continually offer remission of interest and arrears when there were no markets for fruit merely extended the settlers' misery.

Mark Stranger⁵¹ was just such a settler, typical of many, forced to leave his property as a result of the lack of markets and poor returns. That he was a broken and embittered man is clearly evident from the letter he wrote to the Board in 1923 when surrendering his lease:

Owing to the fact that I have to experience another bad season with the apple markets I find that I am in financial difficulties with the merchants & under the immediate prospects in view cannot possibly pay my way...It seems hard that after sinking four hundred pounds & three years hard labour on this place that one has to walk out in debt...The place when I took it over was in bad condition. In regard to rent I have done my best to meet the Board in every way & feel safe in saying that I am among the small number of soldier settlers in this district who have done so. I will leave the matter in your hands I have done my best a man could do no more.⁵²

But Stranger was not alone. Thirty four other Huon settlers vacated their properties at this time. By December 1924 some 48% (53) of all Huon settlers who would vacate their leases had done so.⁵³ The government's offer of remission and revaluations provided small hope to settlers and was clearly designed as no more than a mild palliative to the growing complaints of the settlers and their supporters. The Board's decision to sit as a Board of Review at least entitled the government to

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ AB19/2947.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Figures derived from the AB19 Files for the Huon.

claim it was doing something to help the soldiers and, most importantly, served to defer serious consideration of a total revaluation, a situation the government most feared. But the remissions and revaluations given to Huon settlers clearly demonstrated the paucity and tardiness of government largess.

The cases of Garnett Graham⁵⁴, Vernon Hinton⁵⁵, Cyril Rodman⁵⁶ and Charles Donaghue⁵⁷ exemplify this point. Graham approached the Board for a revaluation in August 1923, claiming his property was not "worth the money placed on it, for the reason the place is so subjected to floods. I am continually losing heavily every year on account of this. I reckon that I lost this year 1000 cases of apples also 3/4 acre of potatoes."⁵⁸ The property's value was reduced from £1 000 to £860 after the Inspector confirmed Graham's claims. In 1925 the property was revalued again. The new value was set at £460. Although the annual rental now fell to £23 Graham was still unable to make the property pay and he surrendered it in 1926. In 1924 Hinton's buildings were revalued from £650 to £550 and he was allowed remission of £41 on arrears. He vacated his property the same year. Rodman had his capital value reduced in 1924 from £1 219 to £1 000 and he received a reduction of £15 in rent. He surrendered his property in 1933. Donaghue received a partial revaluation of his property in 1923 and saw his capital valuation fall from £1 500 to £1 090 but despite such reduction he, like the others, was forced to surrender his lease the same year. In these, and other similar cases, it is clear the Board's limited revaluations or remissions provided insufficient incentive for a settler to continue with the property. The highly inflated original valuations and the decline in the apple industry left them little choice.

Such revaluations and remissions even offered little help to those settlers who would eventually prove successful. Thomas Burnaby from Port Cygnet provides an example. He had purchased his property in 1919 but in May 1923 sought a revaluation because of "three successive disastrous seasons, and the low prices ruling for apples on the English

⁵⁴ AB19/143.

⁵⁵ AB19/2701.

⁵⁶ AB19/1601.

⁵⁷ AB19/910.

⁵⁸ AB19/143.

markets this season."⁵⁹ At this stage Burnaby found himself scarcely able to meet his commitments to the Board. He insisted his application for revaluation be dealt with privately, and warned that if this was not the case he would prefer to continue as best he could. While failure was endemic to the system there were many who still did not lose their pride. No doubt Burnaby felt that the presence of Board members on his property, so clearly intent on reviewing his position, would be the subject of intolerable gossip within the community. Certainly his communications with the Board showed him to be an able and capable settler in trouble through no fault of his own. The Board assured Burnaby his application would be heard privately.

In June Burnaby informed the Board that due to recent inclement weather he was likely to experience yet another bad season. It had now become imperative that his request for a revaluation be heard at the earliest possible occasion. He told the Board that it was "now time that (it) should sit and report, as it would then see in actuality the present disastrous position of the man on the land."⁶⁰ For Burnaby the moment of crisis had arrived.

In November Burnaby wrote the Board an extremely detailed letter:

I respectfully make the following appeal in connection with the property owned by me.

1. That the property be revalued for rental purposes to nineteen hundred pounds ie the original value of the Board in 1919, at time of purchase.

2. That the two hundred pounds paid by me as cash deposit above the amount of value by the Board be remitted to myself as arrears and rent due etc.

In making the above request, which I request you to give serious consideration, there is no need for me to refer at length to the unsatisfactory state of the fruit industry throughout Australia generally.

The position of the orchard settlers must be well known to yourself to need any reference here.

But I would briefly point out that the low price of fruit, bad carriage, high freights, & high cost of general production, had had

⁵⁹ AB6/372.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

the effect of reducing profits as to make it practically impossible to pay interest, & hire on the capital values of the land in 1919. The first after the war boom in land.

Since taking possession here I have, in common with other growers, been faced firstly, with the impossibility of obtaining space for fruit, ie 1920-1921. During the first of those years I shipped overseas about 300 cases & in the second only about 500, owing to lack of space. This caused a tremendous glut of fruit on local and interstate markets; so much so that a large quantity had to be carted straight from the orchard to the evaporating factory & sold for 2/- & 1/6 per bushel of 50 lbs. Unfortunately in 1922 though more space was available the fruit carried very badly & the losses of the year are well known to all. Fortunately however I was able to pay one years rent etc out of my own means & anticipated better times, which however have not yet materialised, but with an endeavour to pay my way I raised a loan of seventy five pounds on improvements, fifty pounds of which I refunded as rent etc due.

Had the year 1922 not been so disastrous I should not have gone into arrears with my rent etc, but as that year ran me heavily into debt at the time I have found it quite impossible to pay my way & can see no way of quickly pulling up the one hundred pounds due for that year.

I would draw your attention to the fact that I have at all times thoroughly worked, sphered & pruned the orchard & no labour had been spared, besides which about fifty pounds worth of manure has been sown on the property at my own immediate expense.

Realising the necessity of having some other means of income beside the orchard I have carried out at considerable expense, a scheme of clearing, grassing, besides improving & extending fences, repairing & improving buildings etc & there is no doubt that from now on I shall reap the benefit of this work.

In 1921, 1922 there was no market for plums & I found it necessary to feed my potatoes to stock on account of low prices.

I may add I have no complaint with the property but with the unsatisfactory condition of the fruit industry, & therefore I appeal, for your very serious consideration, of my requests, emphasizing the facts that I have laid out all my capital about six hundred

pounds in the place, & have spared no effort to keep the property in first class order and condition.⁶¹

Burnaby, like most settlers, achieved a limited success in his application but unlike the majority, retained his property (until the mid 1950s when it was purchased by his son.) The fact that he found regular and profitable employment on the Hobart wharves no doubt helped. As an older and married man he also had the help of his sons to work the orchard in his absences.



Huonville: orchards in early 1920s.

By the end of 1924 nearly all the soldier settlers in the Huon were in difficulty. The condition of the fruit industry, overvaluations, purchase of poor properties, growing unemployment, and failing health and a less than helpful policy of remissions and revaluations had all played their part. But one is left wondering when a case like that of Charles Jackson⁶² from Esperance is considered. Was this an instance of sheer incompetence on the Board's part or a case of wilful deceit on the part of local interests. At this remove it is difficult to determine. In 1919 the government valuator had suggested the property would make a poor purchase, Grace Calvert claiming "it would never keep a man and his family, but by working on it some 4 or 5 acres of small fruit could be

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² AB19/2172.

grown (but)...the lessee will have to earn most of his income outside of the property."⁶³ The government, as was so often the case, allowed



Jackson's "home": the subject of such a damning report.

Jackson his property. Jackson took up his lease in 1920 but had left by 1923. Following his departure the Board asked its insurer, the Tasmanian Government Insurance Office, to report on the value of the property. The report created wide-spread consternation within the Department:

I found the dwelling and attached kitchen in a most deplorable condition and quite unfit for habitation. The place is very damp, floors dropping, paper hanging off ceilings, and walls, principally owing to dampness - back verandah boards ripped up and taken away - evidently for firewood - spoutings down and one room at back of house is used as a cattle shelter - windows broken and all doors open. The trees in the orchard are worth nil as the whole place is open to any straying cattle, and fences are down. The only item of any value is the iron on the roof and this should be worth approximately forty pounds. I might state that I would not accept the whole property as a gift and in view of the condition of the building, the place from an insurance point of view is valueless. I would suggest that the policy be at once cancelled and return

⁶³ *ibid.*

premium made. I confirm our inspector's report in every detail and do not think the same was drastic enough. Enclosed you will find two small photographs of the building and you will note that the supports of the verandah are also falling down. I can unhesitatingly state that out of many thousands of places inspected by the writer during the past 34 years, that the building in question is the worst he has ever inspected.⁶⁴

There was continued correspondence between the Board and the T. G. I. O. over the property until 1936 when the Agricultural Bank finally declared it a complete loss.

The receipt of letters such as that of M. E. Mitchelmore of Southport would have done little to reassure the Board of the wisdom of its purchases. Mitchelmore, like so many others, had approached the Board with the intention of renting a vacated property at Strathblane and his letter, delightfully understated as it may be, nevertheless provides clear evidence of the widespread failure of resettlement in Esperance: "if you can understand you have had a bit of bad luck with the places you have bought, people who have bin to tired to work them..⁶⁵ Mitchelmore was allowed to rent his house for 6s a week due mainly to the Board's fear that local mill hands would strip the house of all that was valuable if it were left vacant too long. All this exemplified how depression in the Huon threatened the Board's interests.

Thomas Inches, the Board's Inspector in the Huon, officially sanctioned Mitchelmore's claims in his annual report for 1924. Inches reported that "a fair amount of the time has been taken up endeavouring to find tenants for vacated farms."⁶⁶ Inches's report painted a picture of near total despair. He noted that extremely wet weather had again led to a reduction in the quantity and quality of the crop and with low prices prevailing in England the growers had received poor returns. He made reference to one orchardist who had only received 1s 6d a case for fruit, and pointedly noted that such prices were only "obtained by men who (had) spent a lifetime on the orcharding industry, and they find it difficult this year to make ends meet. Small matter for wonder is it

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Department Report For 1923-24, T. J. P. P., Vol XCI 1924-25, Paper No 13.

then," reported Inches, "when returned soldiers are finding things very difficult."⁶⁷ Despite the prevalent doom and gloom of his report Inches still upheld the Board's optimistic assurance that "given a good season or two, the soldier settlers generally will get on all right."⁶⁸ Such optimism rang hollow against the reality of the following season. As ever the hoped for good season failed to materialise and many Huon settlers were plunged deeper into debt.

By 1924 the settlers' sense of hopelessness is clearly evidenced by the note of resignation that permeated their correspondence with the Board. None of the Board's stratagems to keep settlers on their properties had proved effective and many settlers were now forced to work off their holdings just to "keep the pot boiling". In some instances this was to be merely the forerunner to departure; in other cases the last desperate effort to retain what capital settlers had built up in their orchards.

In March 1924 Studley Townshend wrote to the Board from Cradoc to surrender his property. The continuing poor returns on fruit had left him no option. "I find I am unable to forward any of the money due to you owing to the crop on this place being a complete failure this year. I am already twelve months interest behind & it would be fully twelve months before I would be able to find anything at all."⁶⁹ The fact that Townshend had been forced to work off the property for nine months of each year to feed his family had left him little chance to develop his orchard. In one sense though Townshend was lucky for he at least found local employment. Others were not so "lucky". With unemployment so widespread in the area many settlers were forced to leave the Huon Joshua Bone was such an individual. Having failed to find local employment he was forced to surrender his orchard in 1924 to move to the mainland in search of work.⁷⁰ His had been one of those properties purchased on the assumption that part time employment would have been readily available. It had been a costly assumption for the taxpayer.

Not all settlers were as honest as Bone and Townshend and the Board had ever to be on the lookout for those attempting to use the system to their advantage. In June 1924 Malcolm Schultz from Wattle Grove

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ AB19/2304.

⁷⁰ AB19/2298.

asked the Board for permission to work away from his property. He also sought a remission of rent. In his absence Schultz planned to employ someone on contract to carry out the labour on his property. His letter displayed a remarkable confidence on his part: "of course you havent been hard on me in the past and I have no reason to think that you will be in the future."⁷¹ Such confidence was well founded for he was granted a remission of rent and allowed to sub-let the property for 5s a week. But in 1925 a neighbour informed Inspector Cairns that Schultz soon intended to surrender his property. Following his investigations Cairns told the Board that "it is common talk that Schultz is going to get this season's crop off & then throw it up. The crop is very good: & I suggest if this lessee is behind with his payment the Dept should get some hold on the crop"⁷² The Board soon cancelled the lease and took control of the crop, Schultz receiving 25% as compensation for his labours. Schultz was lucky to receive such a return. Many honest settlers had left with nothing.

The 1924-25 season, following a by now established pattern, also proved disastrous. While returns on fruit had been generally reasonable the General Strike in England had left many settlers in receipt of bills rather than income. As Cairns noted in his 1925 report "the returns coming to hand are very poor, in some cases the grower being in debt. With the exception of those who sold the larger portion of their crop F.O.B. the season is disastrous, & I feel greatly concerned over the position of some of our settlers."⁷³ Cairns was right to be concerned.

By the end of 1925 the number of settlers who had left their properties in the Huon had risen to 62. By now fully 60% of those settlers who would eventually prove unsuccessful had left their farms. The continued failure of the apple industry and the difficulty of finding employment, matched with the ever deepening debt of the settlers, ensured such departures would continue. In October 1925 William Jones of Glen Huon approached the Board with the request that an Inspector

⁷¹ AB19/2552.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ Closer Settlement Board and Lands and Surveys Department: Report For 1925-26, T J. P. P., Vol XCV 1926-27., Paper No 28.

be sent down to discuss his financial position. Jones claimed he could not:

carry on with the place any longer as we are milking down here and the weather is so bad we are having so much rain down here there is now grass down here for the cows...I will off to turn out and go out to work to earn a live as we have very little money fore enythink and I am still receiving the bills for my arries and it is a grate worry to me and I would rather be off the place⁷⁴

Although granted a suspension of arrears and advised to sell off a portion of his property to raise working capital he was ultimately forced to vacate in 1930, by which time the financial burden had become too great to bear.

Not all displayed Jones's submissive attitude. In early 1925 Russel Ayres again wrote to the Board. Now he complained about the Board's payments to a local contractor for work supposedly done on his property. For Ayres such payments clearly evidenced the indifference with which the Board treated its settlers. Vehemently he wrote:

don't these things get a little attention. Of course he is not a soldier settler it does not matter about that, who makes good to the Government all this, why should not all these blunders be made pay up, we are called up to make our part good, so if you can cast things like that aside why cannot the soldiers arrears be cast aside.⁷⁵

Ayres complained again about the lack of a road to his place, a problem he considered to be the major hurdle to his success. He claimed such a road would give him "a chance to pay up my arrears that will be assissate to a soldier what they all preach but don't practice."⁷⁶

Although Ayres would not have realised it, his words were to prove prophetic. Since January 1917 the dilemma of soldier settlement had bedevilled successive state governments. None had been able to formulate a policy that provided the correct balance between the soldiers' claims to patriotism and the financial strain this imposed upon a community suffering its most severe depression since the 1890s. The moral responsibility incumbent upon the politicians, when matched to

⁷⁴ AB19/1228.

⁷⁵ AB19/2458.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

the financial and political reality of the situation, had led to a dangerous policy of inaction. By 1925 such a policy had brought the state near to financial ruin. For ten years government had found itself unable to deal with the problem of soldier settlement in a sound financial way - to have done so would have invited electoral disaster. To tamper with a clearly flawed scheme was the only option they had been able, or willing, to follow. Lyons and his government had remained well aware of this massive problem. Its unravelling demands a return to broader issues of State policy. The Royal Commission promised Lyons the hope that this long standing delicate balance might be broken and that finally some realistic course of action would be open to the government.

Chapter Eight.

Minister and Board as Adversaries; Royal Commission as Adjudicator.

The Royal Commission into soldier settlement began its work on 18 June 1926 and presented its report to Premier Lyons some three months later on 29 September.¹ Lyons chose the Chief Justice, Sir Herbert Nicholls, to head the Commission. C. H. Ferguson was appointed assistant. Nicholls was an obvious choice for such a role. He had been a former Independent Member of the House of Assembly, attorney-general and Minister administering the Education Act in Propsting's Government of 1903-04 and leader of the Opposition from 1906 until his appointment to the Supreme Court in 1909. Having already sat on a number of Royal Commissions he was experienced to the task.² The Commission found the State's resettlement scheme to have been a complete failure and effectively exonerated all involved. It was a finding that surprised few. Politicians of all persuasions had long been aware of the underlying causes of the continued failure of soldier settlement. Indeed, G. M. Foster and Frederick Burbury when questioning the Board's efforts in August 1918, had foreshadowed the Commission's findings. The settlers' experiences bore ready testament to such failure. The Lee Government's decision to allow settlers the opportunity to take up properties throughout the State had effectively ensured an awareness of such difficulties within most Tasmanian communities.

The Commission's findings were welcomed by the Government, the Closer Settlement Board and those soldier settlers still remaining on their farms. For Lyons the Commission's findings gave hope for exorcising that emotional hold returned men had held over successive governments since 1919; a hold that had brought the State to the brink of economic disaster. Lyons hoped the Commission's findings would at last enable his Government to place the administration of soldier settlement on a more business like basis, ensuring the needs of the State came before those of the returned men. The Commission's findings promised the Board an end to what it knew had been the damaging political interference of all governments since the scheme's inception in 1917. No doubt officers of the Board felt vindicated by the Commission's findings

¹ RC 37/1

² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, Vol 11 1988, pp. 22-23.

that this continued political interference had been primarily responsible for the Board's inability to resolve the recurrent problems of soldier settlement. The Royal Commission promised the Board an independence it had never enjoyed before and gave the assurance that at last settlers would be dealt with on the basis of economic rationality rather than political advantage. The Commission's decision to recommend

reevaluations to the remaining settlers raised hope that something might be gained after their long years of struggle. That the Commission recognised revaluation alone might prove insufficient suggested to these men the possibility of a more optimistic future.

The *Mercury* and the *Examiner* reported the Commission's findings in full³ though such publication inspired little reaction, the correspondence pages of both papers remaining silent on the matter. The *Mercury* was highly critical of the Commission's seemingly cavalier approach to the actions of those successive Ministers who had allowed, for entirely political reasons, the continuation of a scheme known to have been inherently flawed and expressed its concern that officers of the Board had unwillingly aided such duplicity for fear of losing their positions. For the *Mercury* "the report of the Royal Commission...(was) of a nature to make people reading it rub their eyes and ask where they are."⁴ Of course the *Mercury's* adoption of such a high moral stance conveniently ignored its responsibility in having created a political climate that precluded responsible action on the part of either the Board or Government.

By way of contrast the *Examiner* found "the Royal Commission's report (to have been) a very human document."⁵ Though a sad tale of failure, it was a failure inspired by the highest of motives: the establishment of a program that allowed for a "practical remembrance" to those who had shown themselves willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. Any inactivity on the part of Government was understandable, "the returned soldiers' voice ... a powerful one in a land still throbbing with the pangs of war wounds."⁶ Talk of patriotism, of a debt of honour,

³ *Mercury*, September 30 1926; *Examiner* September 30 1926

⁴ *Mercury*, September 30 1926

⁵ *Examiner*, September 30 1926.

⁶ *ibid.*

had meant that no cost had been considered too great at the scheme's conception but as "the errors of those days ... seeded and reproduced their kind, ... the benefits of the scheme (became)... almost smothered beneath a tangle of debt and failure."⁷ The *Examiner* argued for the nexus between politics and sentiment to be severed: it was time for the Government to adopt a business like approach. But the paper warned that while the Commission's suggested program of revaluation might solve some problems it should not be viewed as a general panacea. There would be more heart ache before the sorry tale ended.

While the Commission's report elicited little, if any, response within the wider community, its appearance provoked a deal of controversy within Parliament.⁸ Such controversy centred not upon the Commission's findings, a topic upon which all were in general agreement, but upon the reasons behind the Government's decision to establish the Commission. The opposition was convinced the primary motivation for the Government's decision lay more in the disagreement between the Minister responsible for soldier settlement, James Belton, and his Department, than in any abiding concern for the plight of the settler or the State's finances.

In November 1926, the Opposition, during debate on the estimates in committee of supply, questioned the Government over a payment of £450 to the Commission's secretary, H. R. Dobbie. Such a seemingly innocuous inquiry was merely the forerunner to a more damaging, and certainly more embarrassing, line of questioning. That line of questioning soon became obvious when C. E. W. James asked the Government why the Royal Commission had been established in the first place. It was a question which evoked consternation and confusion. A. G. Ogilvie's reply showed a keen understanding of its import. No doubt adopting the adage that "attack is the best form of defence", Ogilvie proceeded to attack the Opposition over its handling of soldier settlement, making particular reference to the strained relationships that had existed between previous Ministers and the Board. Such a fraught response to such a seemingly innocent question heartened the Opposition. Sir Walter Lee, clearly aware the Opposition had touched upon a raw nerve, laconically noted that the Government "seemed

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *Mercury*, November 25 1926.

reluctant in telling members what the reason was."⁹ The comment led Ogilvie to a vituperative attack over Lee's decision to establish a Royal Commission into the State's railways. Undeterred, Lee now suggested the Royal Commission into soldier settlement had been established primarily because Belton as Minister had been unable to work with officers of his own Department. "Dame rumour was ever a lying jade", claimed Lee, "but it has been said there was friction between the Minister and officers of the Department."¹⁰ Lee was also curious as to why the Royal Commission's report had been tabled but not published. When the Government claimed the report was not important enough to warrant publication, Lee declared the whole issue to be peculiar, though it must be doubted whether Lee ever understood the full peculiarity of the situation.

That Lee's accusations were based more on fact than rumour though is supported by the memoirs of Noel Lamidey,¹¹ an Englishman who emigrated to Tasmania in the early 1920s. Lamidey's original intention to take up orcharding frustrated by poor health, he sought, and was given, a position in the State's public service. He soon found himself Chief Clerk to the Board and privy to the inner workings of Belton's Department. It was a position of some political sensitivity, especially following Lyons's serious motor-vehicle accident of July 1926. According to Lamidey Albert Ogilvie¹², used his new found power to push for a Royal Commission into soldier settlement - a move designed more to undermine Belton's standing in the Labor Party than to further the settlers' interests. But Lamidey reported Ogilvie's plans to be soon threatened by Nicholls's decision to adjourn his hearings sine die; Nicholls having failed to uncover any evidence that could justify the continuation of his hearings. Lamidey now claimed to have been approached by a senior public servant and promised rapid advancement on condition he revealed any illegal actions on the part of Belton's Department. Lamidey scorned such approaches, believing Belton to be an "honest and a kindly politician - insofar as any politician can be

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Lamidey, N. W., *Partial Success: My years as a Public Servant*, Canberra: Self-Published (1970).

¹² It should be noted Lamidey was in error in suggesting A. G. Ogilvie, rather than the Chief Secretary J. A. Guy, was acting Premier in Lyons's absence. His memoirs do though fit well with other evidence.

honest - with the interests of his Department at heart."¹³ Such faith was soon undermined at the next sitting of the Commission when Belton sat side by side with Ogilvie. Lamidey could only invoke the inherent hypocrisy of politicians to explain such a situation. "This switch at Ministerial level was a facer. Whereas we had been defending his administration we now found in this new and rather precarious situation that he was no longer (ironically enough) on his own side."¹⁴ Against better advice from senior colleagues Lamidey next confronted Ogilvie over his political machinations. It was to be a pyrrhic victory and only Lamidey's departure for Melbourne and the Federal Government's Development and Migration Commission allowed him to avoid Ogilvie's inevitable retribution.

While Lamidey's accusations hold the essential element of truth they nevertheless do not detract significantly from Lee's claim that the Royal Commission was established as a result of antagonisms between Belton and his own Department. Perhaps Lamidey's faith in Belton had been misplaced. In the event it is clear that the Royal Commission's role was to a large extent fixated upon the adjudication of the dispute between Belton and his Board. Both Belton and W. N. Hurst, Board President and Secretary for Lands, provided the Commission with submissions which were highly critical of the other party. As Lee very well knew, it was this dispute which had lain at the core of the Royal Commission's activities.

The tension that had long existed between Belton and his Board reached breaking point after the Labor Party's success in the State election of June 1925. Labor, in winning sixteen of the thirty parliamentary seats, at last gained office in its own right; the Party finally free to implement its own policies without recourse to the support of independents. Central amongst those policies was Belton's promise immediately to revalue all properties belonging to soldier settlers. Belton knew such a promise would inspire intense resentment on the part of the Board, long opposed to all attempts at revaluation. But Belton knew that a Labor victory would give him the mandate to insist upon his promise and effectively resolve his dispute with the Board.

While such an outcome no doubt played a significant role in Belton's

¹³ *ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.12.

decision it was overshadowed by more important political and economic considerations. Revaluations promised to deliver the electoral support of the R. S. L., a support which might prove crucial in a Parliament so evenly divided.¹⁵ And that support could be attained in the happy knowledge that revaluations were already high on Belton's agenda.

As earlier chapters have shown, since the end of the war the economic plight of Tasmania's rural sector had intensified with each successive year. Nowhere else was this effect more pronounced than upon the soldier settlers. They had soon recognised their properties to have been over valued and as such incapable of providing a living. The need for revaluations was soon high on the list of R. S. L. demands. By 1923 R. S. L. calls for revaluation had become insistent and in July it had held a special meeting in Hobart to discuss the settler's difficulties.

Those who addressed the meeting were adamant that they were in no way responsible for their plight. They perceived themselves to have been the victims of the severe downturn in the rural sector, the inequitable terms under which they had been placed on their farms and the greatly inflated prices they had been forced to pay for their properties. The meeting believed there would soon be a mass exodus of settlers unless something was soon done to ease their difficulties. It was argued that this exodus would not only prove embarrassing to Government but wholly transfer the economic burden from the struggling settlers to the taxpayer.

The meeting was convinced the only course open to Government was the immediate and complete revaluation of all soldier settlement properties. While it was admitted such revaluations would pose an enormous cost to the State it was argued "any adequate steps taken to place soldier settlers on a sound basis would involve a large loss to the State, but loss was inevitable, because if no action was taken hundreds of good settlers would be forced to give up their farms."¹⁶

While such complaints continued throughout 1924-25, generally through the correspondence of individual settlers but occasionally through meetings organized by the R. S. L., the settlers continued to struggle on their properties. By 1926 the situation had become

¹⁵ That no government of the early 1920s had sufficient numbers to allow of decisive action over soldier settlement certainly played a significant role in creating difficulties for the settlers

¹⁶ Huon Times, February 2 1923.

desperate.

In April 1926 a large gathering of soldiers met at Penguin to complain of their difficulties yet again.^{16A} The meeting passed two resolutions: the first calling upon the Government to halt all proceedings against defaulting settlers until a revaluation of their properties had taken place and the second urging the replacement of the existing soldier settlement Board with a simpler administration which would be incorporated into the Lands Department.

Following the meeting, a deputation met the Minister responsible for soldier settlement, Mr Belton, and impressed upon him the need to carry out their demands. Belton told the members of the deputation that "he was fully seized of the position of soldier settlement, and the matter had given both himself and the government concern."¹⁷ While he promised some action on re-valuation, he refused to commit the government on the matter of reconstituting the Board, and gave no hint that a wide-ranging inquiry would ensue.

In fact the Government had been contemplating such a move for some time, its hand forced by Belton's growing antipathy towards the Board and the ever deepening crisis in the State's finances. That the two were inexorably linked in the minds of many would prove more than a happy juxtaposition of circumstances.

Belton had, upon Labor's return to office in 1925, instructed the Board to carry out a complete revaluation of all properties still in the hands of soldier settlers. It was Belton's second attempt at revaluations. An earlier attempt in 1924 had met with spirited resistance from the Board, its decision to limit revaluations to remissions on interest and arrears effectively undermining what had been an already limited gesture on Belton's part. The Board's actions had both frustrated and angered Belton who was now determined upon nothing less than a full revaluation of all soldier settler properties. But by November 1925 it was clear to Belton that the Board had no intention of carrying out his electoral promise. He promptly recalled Board members, then at Marrawah, to Hobart. Fortuitously for Belton one of their number, O. G. Norton, chose this moment to take leave to travel to England. Belton now moved to replace Norton with a temporary appointee, one Harold Brumby, and

¹⁷ Q. Beresford, "The World War One Soldier Settlement Scheme in Tasmania", *THRAPP* 30, No 3, 1983. p97.

proposed that Brumby, and not the Board, carry out revaluations. It was Belton's intention that Brumby should report directly to the Minister on his revaluations, effectively bypassing the Board. This would give Belton complete control over revaluations.

The Board bitterly resented Belton's plan arguing "the man (had) not been born who (could) fairly value farms extending from the north of King Island to the south of the Huon, which includes pastoral, dairying, sheep, orchard, and small fruit properties."¹⁸ Belton countered by suggesting Brumby's employment would introduce a necessary uniformity into revaluation. The Board and its Minister had reached impasse.

In December 1925 Belton informed Cabinet of the need for immediate action on soldier settlement losses, and warned that the Board's present policy of remission on interest merely postponed the inevitable, offering no solution to what had by now become an increasingly complex problem. Belton informed Cabinet "on their present valuations, very few first-class farmers could make a living from holdings which are occupied by soldiers"¹⁹ and suggested the time had come for the Government "to get to the root of the problem."²⁰ Belton believed the appointment of an independent valuator such as Brumby to be the only possible way for settlers to receive a fair revaluation of their farms. After all, Belton suggested:

it (was only) natural that the Board which was responsible for the purchase of the holdings should show some hesitancy in reducing substantially the valuation of the properties which it purchased, as the members must deem it a reflection on their judgement of former values.²¹

Belton also believed that any further attempts by the Board to continue with the revaluations would "be strongly opposed by the soldiers themselves."²²

The impasse was eventually resolved following "compromise" between Belton and the Board, a compromise which saw the appointment of the

¹⁸ RC 37/1: W. N. Hurst submission to Royal Commission., p.9.

¹⁹ PD1/409/176/12/25, 3 January 1925.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² RC 37/1: J. Belton submission to Royal Commission., p.4.

State's Chief Valuer, The Commissioner of Taxes, H. E. Downie, to oversee the revaluations. But Downie, believing the task of revaluation to be beyond the competence of any one man, soon appointed special evaluators to help him, a decision that doubtless pleased the Board. It was, however, the last pleasure the Board enjoyed. Belton temporarily suspended its operations in March 1926.

Belton and the Board offered differing interpretations of this event to the Royal Commission. Hurst suggested the Board's rejection of Brumby as valuator had led to "a feeling of estrangement between the Minister and the Board,"²³ as a consequence of which Belton terminated the Board's meetings. Belton proffered the alternative explanation that "in view of the expenses entailed by the Board's Meetings, (now Downie was supervising revaluations) I discouraged the calling of members together...(considering) the Departmental officers could handle the position in a better way."²⁴ Whatever the truth Belton now moved for a Royal Commission into the Board's affairs, claiming his decision to have been motivated by a long time concern "that arrears were heaping up, remissions of rent and the writing off of bad debts were....considerable, and on the increase,...(and)...that...there was a weakness somewhere in the departmental administration."²⁵ The Government was only too ready to accept such a recommendation. After all the cost of soldier settlement had bedevilled successive Nationalist Governments: Lee's fall from office in 1923 was largely the result of his inability to deal with the issue. Lyons no doubt realised his own Government would be short-lived unless he either found a successful resolution to the issue or a means of distancing his Government from its political dangers. The idea of a Royal Commission promised both Belton and Lyons the opportunity they needed. Certainly the State's financial situation called for some form of immediate action.^{25A}

In October 1925 Lyons reported to Parliament on the continuing crisis in the state's finances, in no small measure a consequence of the soldier settlement scheme.²⁶ Lyons noted the special relief given the state by the Commonwealth in 1923 but had still to record that "future heavy

²³ RC 37/1 Hurst submission., p.9.

²⁴ RC 37/1 Belton submission., p.3

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Financial Statement of the Treasurer, October 1925, *T. J. P. P.*, Vol XCIII, 1925-26, Paper No 17.

losses are inevitable. It has been pointed out if all properties were let, and every settler met his obligations in full, the undertaking would cost £35 000 per annum, but the actual loss for the year was over £120 000."²⁷ For a considerable time successive governments had been able to insulate the real cost of the scheme from the taxpayer. This had been accomplished by recording the cost of the scheme as a charge against revenue. By June 1925 it had become clear to Lyons that such an approach could not be carried on indefinitely. The annual amount owed by settlers had risen from £22 34 in 1921 to £162 990 in 1925. In just six years the total debt on the scheme had risen to a staggering £666 430. By now the scheme's financial obligations had become "greater than the state (could) bear"²⁸ and Lyons, rather than asking the Tasmanian taxpayer to defray the cost, sought further relief from the Federal government. He had no choice: without Federal assistance Tasmania faced financial ruin.

The annual report of the Department of Lands, Survey and Closer Settlement for 1924-25 had no doubt helped force Lyons's hand.²⁹ The report noted the cancellation of 125 soldier settler leases for the year and warned Parliament that the central problem now facing the Board lay in determining the extent of debt to be allowed settlers before cancelling their leases. As Belton noted:

the work of collection has presented many difficulties, and in 44 cases it has been found necessary to issue warrants of distress for rent. This action has been taken where circumstances warranted, and only then when all other measures have been exhausted. Many deserving and industrious settlers have not been in a position to meet their demands and these cases have been given every consideration.³⁰

Hurst had to report that collections on rent had fallen for the year and that he could now see no way, given present policy, of the Board being able to overcome the burgeoning growth in settlers' debt. The simple fact that the State borrowed its money at six percent only ensured the

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Annual report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement For 1924-25, T. J. P. P., Vol XCIII, 1925-26, Paper No 25.

³⁰ *ibid.*

continuation of such losses. The increasing accumulation of arrears, the high cost of administering vacated leases and the necessarily lower rates the Board had to offer to attract civilian tenants only underlined the seriousness of the continuing crisis in soldier settlement. Hurst foreshadowed even further losses on soldier settlement now many settlers were in receipt of demands for payment on recent advances. That persistent veneer of optimism, all too evident in earlier reports, had by now become very thin. "Although it cannot be claimed," wrote Hurst, "that soldier settlement is an unqualified success, it must be conceded that it has resulted in an increase in the productivity of the State generally."³¹ Such words offered small comfort to Lyons.

The annual report of the now Closer Settlement Board and Lands and Surveys Department for 1925-26 proved even more disquietening. Though the Federal Government had waived £262 000 of the State's debt on soldier settlement Hurst had to report that debt to be still rising,³² outstanding arrears now at a worrying £201 813.³³ But what particularly concerned Hurst was the "number of settlers who do not appear to make any attempt to keep faith with the Crown, and who trade on the public sentiment."³⁴ This hard core of debtors had by now become particularly obvious due to the clear polarisation in the nature of the settlers' debt. Hurst urged the Government to take action against this 12% of settlers who now owed 51% of outstanding arrears, arguing that the time had arrived for them to:

be made to realise that the country cannot afford to carry them any further, or grant more concessions than are provided under existing legislation, and that unless they conform to the conditions as laid down by Parliament, they must give way to others who will endeavour to meet their obligations.³⁵

Such attitude had left the Board directly opposed to Belton's promised revaluations. Indeed the Board argued that revaluations could only exacerbate what was an already difficult situation, reporting "many

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Annual Report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement for 1925-26, T. J. P. P., Vol XCV, 1926-27, Paper No 28.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

lessees (to be) withholding payment until it is known what the outcome of the revaluations is to be."³⁶ Better, so the Board believed, to offer remissions on interest and arrears and allow the genuine trier to succeed than to prop up those failures who must be removed. It was of course an attitude that placed responsibility for such failure upon the settlers rather than the Board, a view rejected by Belton. Such tension had finally led to the Board's suspension, Downie's appointment and became the prime cause and the prime theme of the Royal Commission of 1926. Belton's parliamentary report of this dispute disguised the ill-feeling generated by these events:

On making investigation as to the work being performed by the Closer Settlement Board, I found that it was mostly in the direction of submitting recommendations for remission of rent and interest, and that £10 621 0s 10d covering 295 cases, was remitted. This method of meeting the difficulty was, in my opinion, merely palliative, and did not touch the fringe of the problem.³⁷

But if apparently bland, these words revealed the root of the dispute.

The Board had long rejected any idea of revaluations, arguing it denied good business practice and, worse still, encouraged settlers to adopt a light-hearted attitude towards their financial obligations. That the Board, for most of its existence, had served Nationalist Governments, all resolutely opposed to any revaluations had understandably predisposed it to such an attitude. Having established its principles of administration it was now no doubt reluctant, probably on grounds of equity, to alter the way in which it dealt with settlers. There was though another, more significant factor, which lay behind the Board's position. This was its belief that revaluations left the resettlement scheme open to a most direct form of political manipulation.

The Board had, from the scheme's beginning, been subject to such interference. The very act of purchasing the initial properties and their allocation to settlers had often been guided by the whim of political influence rather than responsible economic management. It was an

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Ministerial Statement: Minister for Lands and Works James Belton, November 1926, T. J. P. P., Vol XCV, 1926-27, Paper No 6.

interference which, the Royal Commission found, had by 1923 brought the administration of the scheme to a point where it lacked any ability to deal efficiently with the settlers, to become instead an impotent arm of government subject to legislative whim and political pragmatism.

The Board resented such political interference, believing it to restrict effective management and to create injustices within the system. In Hurst's view Ministerial involvement in revaluations meant many settlers might be denied equitable treatment not because they weren't deserving but because they lived in the wrong electorate. As Hurst informed the Royal Commission:

The legislation does not to my mind in practice work out quite fairly. The Minister must of necessity, being a Member of Parliament, represent a constituency of about one fifth of the voters of the State, a House of Assembly district; he must also of necessity know intimately a great number of the Returned Soldiers in his constituency, and as self-preservation is the first law of life the Board has found Ministers reluctant to approve of recommendations which tend to make them unpopular in their district. This causes real injustice because the settlers in one district get, as a rule, preferential treatment, and this is not fair to the State or the Board.³⁸

Hurst's evidence to the Commission provided numerous references to such political influence. He referred to "one Minister (who) went so far as to prevent ordinary demands for rent to be sent out to Returned Settlers and Closer Settlement lessees in his district within three months of a general election"³⁹ and claimed Belton's promised revaluations before the recent election to have been yet another example of such interference. Hurst noted:

It is remarkable that such promises as these are invariably made just prior to a general election, but such promises make the satisfactory management of the Department an exceedingly difficult if not an impossible task.⁴⁰

It was not a comment to soothe an already antagonistic Minister.

Belton had long been uneasy about the administrative practices of the

³⁸ RC 37/1 Hurst submission to Royal Commission, p.9.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.10.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

Board, believing they were designed more to keep the Minister at a distance than allow the implementation of government policy. Belton's analysis was largely correct. Faced with political interference, the Board had adopted counter practices. Before the Commission, Hurst argued that it was the system and not the individual Minister who had been responsible for the situation.

The Board's decision to resist a general revaluation was not a reflection of innate contrariness on its part. Rather it suggested the central dilemma of the scheme. While the Board believed the success of soldier settlement depended upon the adoption of a business like approach those early Nationalist governments which had overseen the scheme, partly in response to an acknowledged "debt of honour" but no doubt with one eye to electoral advantage, perceived soldier settlement to be an act of public benevolence. Such differing perceptions of the scheme necessarily created tensions between Ministers and their Departments. Belton's Ministerial activities had given little cause for the Board to change its opinion.

From the moment Belton had taken office there had been antagonism between himself and the Board. This feeling led Belton to instruct the Auditor General to assist the Royal Commission in its investigations, a decision resulting from what he believed had been the improper practices on the Board's part, especially in relation to its dealings with advances to settlers and the writing off of any losses on stock and goods. Belton claimed the Board had regularly acted on such matters without his approval, a practice in direct contravention of all normal Ministerial procedures. Belton's complaint held the implicit suggestion such practice verged on the fraudulent. In his evidence to the Royal Commission Belton noted that of the 62 advances made by the Board during the previous seven months 53 had been made without any reference to him. One of these advances had involved the not inconsiderable sum of £500. As Belton warned "it suggests... to me that the lax methods which have been adopted with these advances amounting to thousands of pounds might lead to improper practices."⁴¹

Belton was further irritated by what he claimed to be the lack of information presented to him when investigating the writing off of losses and was irritated that Hurst, in his submission to the Royal Commission,

⁴¹ RC 37/1 Belton submission to Royal Commission, p.2.

had claimed him to be fully apprised of all necessary information in each case. Belton believed the correspondence, reports and investigations in each case were not provided. Indeed, he was able to show that in cases where goods had been illegally disposed of no reference was made to this fact and only the term "missing" was used on reports. Belton was particularly distressed that the police were rarely used in any cases where stock or goods had been listed as "missing" and pronounced himself certain that a greater use of the police would have seen a tighter more diligent response from the settlers.

Belton was though particularly concerned to clarify the issues surrounding the case of Mr Smith, believing it showed there had "been no political interference during (his) term of office."⁴² Belton was also clearly of the opinion that the case offered clear proof of the Board's deliberate intention to undermine his credibility as a Minister. It was indeed a potentially damaging situation for Belton, especially in light of Lamidey's claims, as it involved Belton's son-in-law, J. A. Hurst. On the Board's advice Belton had written off £321 of Smith's debt - never, so Belton claimed, realising that a portion of that sum was in fact owed by Hurst. Belton vehemently protested that if he had known about his son-in-law's involvement he would have referred the matter to someone else. He argued that his own involvement in so personal a case to be completely the result of Board incompetence and suggested the case offered personal example of the Board's dangerous inadequacies. Doubtless it inspired an intense bitterness on Belton's part.

The situation was only made worse when W. N. Hurst, in attempting to justify the case, claimed that no adequate investigation had been made into the case because the then Board President, G. C. Rudge, "was not quite satisfied that every officer in the Department was reliable at this time."⁴³ Belton was quick to note that:

In view of the large amounts which were being collected by the Department, I am unable to understand why a thorough enquiry was not made as if any of the officers were not honest, the Department might have been defrauded of large sums.⁴⁴

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Belton was convinced the Smith case showed W. N. Hurst's claim that the Board " had been candid and open to Ministers and to the Audit Department all through, and nothing has been hidden"⁴⁵ to be false. The case gave ready understanding of Belton's concerns.

Belton's criticisms of the Board provoked the Public Service Commissioner, R. J. Meagher, to appear before the Commission. His defence of the Board was at least in part a scathing attack on Belton. Meagher claimed the Board, over a protracted period of time, had developed practices which were entirely consistent with the correct and proper administration of the settlers and entirely rejected Belton's claims that the Board repeatedly failed to provide sufficient documentation for the proper assessment of cases involving remissions of rent or the writing off of losses on stock and goods. Meagher told the Royal Commissioners that Belton received weekly files on such matters from his Department, though he did concede specific details were often omitted from such reports. But Meagher offered excuse for the Board's actions by arguing that the provision of full particulars would "in effect...mean he (the Minister) would be employed full time as is the Advance Clerk appointed for this particular work."⁴⁶ Meagher believed a Minister's responsibility was not to replicate the work of an Advance Clerk but to formulate new Government initiatives. Indeed, Meagher suggested that Belton's decision, at this stage "to question the authority for granting advances, (showed) an abnormal ignorance of the Department over which he (was) supposed to exercise control."⁴⁷

Meagher also rejected Belton's suggestion that the Board should have made greater use of the police force in the pursuit of defaulters, claiming settlers who illegally disposed of stock or goods rarely made money from their transactions. Indeed, Meagher believed that it would have been "an exceptional (settler who left) with a fortune."^{48A} As well, Meagher believed the prosecution of such settlers would only leave their wives and children in a most desperate situation, a situation to which neither Parliament nor the average citizen could give moral support. Meagher also argued Belton's request to have been too harsh a judgement of the

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ RC 37/1 Submission of R. J. Meagher, Public Service Commissioner, p 3

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

settlers as they, like the community in general, were composed of both the lawful and the lawless. It would be inequitable to treat all settlers as if they were of like character. After all, suggested Meagher, in a comment more redolent of the benevolent politician than the business-like Board he was defending, was it not well to remember:

that the British Empire was not built up by Plaster Saints, the happy-go-lucky careless dare-devil has played his part in the construction of things. Because we now have no need of them (settlers) don't let us forget what they have done in the past, and is the loss of stock even if it were threefold of any consequence to their lost limbs, wrecked bodies and nerve shattered mind.⁴⁹

Meagher was at his most scathing when criticising Belton's decision to promise revaluations as a plank of Labor's 1925 election campaign. He believed such a promise, especially the decision to allow settlers to remain on their farms free of rent until the completion of the revaluations, to have:

completely revolutionised all previous methods of dealing with debtors, and had this promise not been given...many of the bad cases (and by that we mean those who can pay but won't) would have been finalised and their farms let to other people.⁵⁰

Meagher was adamant that the proposed revaluations would in no way improve the Board's ability to deal with such "bad" cases and probably only serve to hamper and restrict the Board's activities in this area.

Meagher's submission to the Royal Commission concluded with some observations of a general, though no less damning nature. He felt Belton's accusations to have shown a "narrowness of vision and personal vindictiveness hard to understand"⁵¹ and called for a more constructive approach to the problems that continued to plague soldier settlement. He believed such an approach would free the Board from a political interference which had so long seen it to be nothing more than "the cockpit of political endeavour."⁵² Meagher's request would only be partially substantiated by the findings of the Royal Commission.

As said at outset the Royal Commission's report was tabled in late

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.4.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.5.

⁵² *ibid.*

September 1926. This merely made public what was known to most. Indeed, the Commissioners seemed somewhat apologetic, noting that the report "to an experienced eye, will appear superfluous, but as to report is our employment, we have set forth our view of what happened."⁵³ The Commissioners were convinced from the outset "that the initial conception of the scheme was such that great losses of money were certain and that of the 2 000 men to be put on the land few could hope to succeed."⁵⁴ The immediate causes of such failure were found by the Commission to have been the high prices paid for land, stock and buildings; the inappropriate procedures adopted for selecting settlers and the consequent unfitness of many of these settlers to manage their farms; the intermittent political interference in the scheme's management and the downturn in the State's economy. But the Commissioners believed the primary cause of failure lay in that "wave of popular enthusiasm for soldier settlement on the land...which swept every one away at the end of the war."⁵⁵ Such public enthusiasm effectively pushed many men onto farms whether they were qualified or not.

That too high a price had been paid for land was only too evident to the Commission. While the Commission partially blamed such circumstance on the involvement of commission agents, the pressure on Government to purchase, the community's belief that the Government, unlike private purchasers, was more likely to pay higher prices for land and on the settlers' desire to purchase properties of their choice, it nevertheless believed the main cause had effectively stemmed from the character and background of the settlers themselves. Many properties had been purchased on the assumption they would have been managed by skilled farmers, not the unskilled, as the Commission found the majority of settlers to have been. The Commission argued that even if a settler had the necessary farming experience he often lacked the business acumen to manage his property effectively. As the Commission noted:

The scheme, in effect, came to buying places from men who had proved that they could not work them and handing those same places over at prices given to successful farmers to men whose

⁵³ RC 37/1 Report of the Royal Commission, p.3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

land prices. Certainly the machinations of Robert Harvey at Cygnet and the comments of Francomb and A. S. Brennan reflect poorly on the Commission's findings at this point.⁶¹

The land purchased and the soldier selected the settler had now to face up to his financial obligations; obligations the Commission held to have been unreasonable, often confusing and of such an onerous nature as would have tested even those best of settlers. The Commission was quick to reject G. C. Rudge's submission to the contrary, claiming it was based on the idea of the perfect, rather than was so often the case, the imperfect settler. Indeed Rudge's desire to introduce an air of optimism into the proceedings was effectively squashed by the Commission's highly qualified concession "that success was possible, indeed probable, for strong, industrious, sober, skilful, and thrifty men."⁶² That the Commission believed such circumstances to have been the exception rather than the rule is obvious.

The Commission having considered the causes of failure now turned its attention to the allocation of blame. As its investigations had largely exonerated the settlers, the Commission had only the roles of the Board and the politicians to consider. As has already been noted, with both the Board and Belton providing submissions which put responsibility for failure on the other party the Commission's role was to be more that of the adjudicator than the investigator. Its decision was to praise and condemn both parties at the same time. While fault was found on both sides, neither was held to have been responsible for the scheme's failure.

The Commissioners found that from the scheme's beginning "the Minister, Board and officials were...faced...with the fact that to make the scheme a real business or political success was impossible."⁶³ The very causes of failure precluded any effective action on their part. The Commission believed it was at this point that "the wisest thing that could (have been) done was to ascertain what men had no chance of success and...remove them at once"⁶⁴ but found this option closed due to political considerations. While many settlers in their departure had selected themselves many remained, "asking for concessions or, in effect,

⁶¹ See Chapter 6: "Resettlement and Political Response", pp 129-133

⁶² RC 37/1 Report of the Royal Commission, p.10

⁶³ *ibid.*, p.12.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

taking them by not paying their dues under the contract."⁶⁵ The Commission, in imagery which clearly reflected R. J. Meagher's submission, considered these men to be a very mixed lot. The problem the Board faced at this point was to determine between those settlers who were genuine triers and those who were incorrigible. It was a process fraught with difficulty, not the least of which lay in the attitude of the politicians who declared that "the scheme now it was set going should be benevolent rather than strictly businesslike."⁶⁶

The Commission based its decision on two grounds. The first of these stemmed from its philosophical approach to the political system - the second was an acknowledgment of the realities of political office. The Commission held the essential nature of government to be one of benevolence, that "public affairs are not and cannot be conducted like a private business. ...The State cannot possibly deal with its affairs upon the principle that whatever pays shall be done."⁶⁷ Government, involved in matters of greater complexity than the mere acquisition of wealth, were required to reflect and act upon the attitudes of the community it served. The Commission held that the government, in adopting a benevolent attitude towards the returned settlers, had correctly assessed the attitude of Tasmania's community in the early 1920s. Of course at a more cynical level the Commission believed that:

if a Minister..(had endeavoured) reasonably to enforce the Crown's rights (he) would...have lost his portfolio and perhaps his seat and have been replaced by someone whose benevolence went the full length of yielding to humbugs as well as honest...men.⁶⁸

After all, that had been the reality of the situation.

The Commission's discussion of the Board's role, though slightly more damning, nevertheless led to its exoneration. The Commission praised the Board for its repeated attempts to administer resettlement on business like lines, especially commending the efforts of the Board's accountant, I. H. Fielding and its then President, J. L. McGough. Though the Commission was prepared to concede political interference had frustrated such intentions it still felt the Board "could and might

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.13.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.14.

have insisted more than (it) did upon a stricter administration of the scheme, instead of passively accepting the extravagantly indiscriminating benevolent attitude"⁶⁹ of Government. But the Commission conceded such a stand to have been fraught with danger, the future prospects of any public servant dependent upon the good offices of his superiors. After all, it argued, the public servant held his position at the Minister's discretion and while "one Minister might thank and praise an officer closely associated with him for a strong attitude (such attitude in) another...(might) awaken dangerous resentment."⁷⁰ That the Commission believed Belton capable of such "dangerous resentment" must be only too obvious. Certainly Belton's submission to the Royal Commission underlined such concerns. It is clear the Commission believed any urgings by the Board for the adoption of a more business-like approach to the settlers would have proved at best useless, at worst dangerous.

The Commission found the tension between the needs of government and the self-preservatory instincts of public servants had by 1923 reduced the system to atrophy. At this point the administration consisted of no more than "the writing of casual letters, usually so weak in tone as to amount almost to invitation to the recipients to bounce the Department."⁷¹ Such an attitude only encouraged settlers to further avoidance of their obligations and "it (seemed) that every one, Ministers, President, Board, Staff and Inspectors lost heart."⁷² But the Commission believed it was also at this point that something might have been done to salvage the scheme. Both the government and the Board, having conceded failure, might have taken action to remove those settlers who were obviously failing. But such a move proved impossible, for at this point the scheme "became affected by minor, detailed and unjustifiable political interference, as contrasted with policy."⁷³ its administration guided more by political abuse than sound principles of government. And what conclusions did the Commission draw:

On the whole we do not see why, from the safe height of our

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p.15.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.14.

⁷² *ibid.*, p.15

⁷³ *ibid.*, p.18.

seats...we should say that anything else was to be expected but that the attitude of the country should be reproduced in the administration of the scheme. The indications seem to us to be very clear. No Minister would have survived who attempted to administer the Soldier Settlement Scheme on a basis of pure business. The party system would have settled that. It seems to us to have been inevitable from the beginning that this scheme would be administered in such a way that the Minister in charge of it always would be secure against a verdict that he was guilty of unpopular things. But the failure of the scheme had come suddenly and overwhelmingly.⁷⁴

The Commission made little comment, except in the most general of terms, on the bitter dispute between Belton and the Board, prepared instead to leave such matters to the courts and parliament. Its investigations at an end the Commission had now only to deliver its recommendations. It believed it was necessary for the Government to establish a new Board, to be given the same legislative protection from political interference as accorded the Judiciary and the Auditor General. Such a Board was to immediately initiate a general revaluation of all soldier settler properties so that the remaining difficulties of settlement might at last be resolved. While the Commission was satisfied that the present Board members were eminently qualified to carry out such a task it accepted the Government's proposal that the Commissioner of Taxes be employed instead and strongly supported Downie's decision to revalue properties on the basis "of what each settler has got from the State, not of what he has to show today."⁷⁵ While the Commission argued that some settlers only needed the sympathetic hand of government to make good it believed there were others who should be turned off at once. Some of these settlers had never been "Bona Fide settlers and (were) only dummifying for a relative, and, even then, not paying their dues" while others were settlers "hopelessly in arrears...doing no good for themselves; (and) to carry them on further (would be)...to postpone their insolvency and ultimately worse."⁷⁶

The Commission urged the adoption of a realistic attitude to the

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p.16.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.21.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p.19.

question of Ministerial control, the issue at the core of the Royal Commission. While conceding that "for a long time the Department...(had) obtained the approval of the Minister as a subsequent and not a precedent act"⁷⁷ the Commissioners rejected Belton's claims that such actions had been deliberately mischievous, if not at times corrupt. The Commission believed the idea of any Minister holding total knowledge of all areas of his portfolio to be impractical - perhaps even undesirable as it often meant he was unable to deal fully with his more important responsibilities. It behove the Minister to have the necessary faith in the integrity and competence of his officers as the strength of Government depended upon such a relationship. Of course the Commission's recommendation that Meagher be instructed to undertake a complete investigation into the Board's administration must have given Belton small comfort.

The difficulty surrounding those farms which had reverted to the State was seen by the Commission to pose the greatest threat of all. For this problem the Commission could offer no suggestion - only warnings:

If they should be rushed onto the market, they would be sold at much less than value. To let them on short leases would be bad business, as the lessee would then be under a strong temptation to suck the life out of the farm and throw it back upon the Government. Long leases would be better, but, even then, there must be a tendency as the lease nears its end for the lessee to take all he can out of the land.⁷⁸

The Government's main danger when disposing of these farms was that it might inadvertently create "a class of lessees with special interests against the Government, who might combine to enforce their demands by political action."⁷⁹ And so the problem would turn full circle. The Commission's recommendations received immediate attention from Government: the revaluation of settlers' properties were undertaken even as the Commission sat. By June 1927 a new Board, possibly more representative of the interests of Government and settlers, was in place and Meagher's inquiries had led to greater efficiencies in administration. What solace Belton may have gained from the

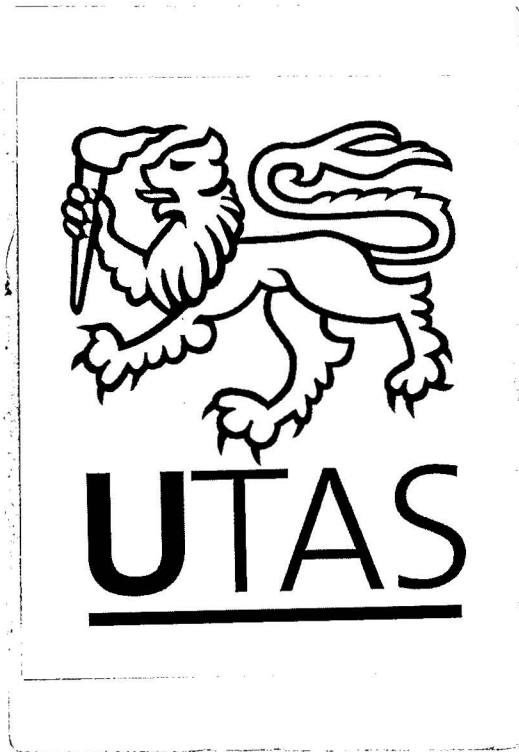
⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.22.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p.24.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

Commission's findings may have been short-lived, Andrew Lawson appointed Minister for Soldier Settlement in early 1927.

While such changes undoubtedly provided some relief to settlers the problem of soldier settlement remained. The settlers still clamoured for further relief as the Government's financial situation continued to worsen. Hurst's observation "that soldier settlement is not, and never could be, a business undertaking"⁸⁰ must have offered little comfort to Government. The latter years of the 1920s would see only an intensification of the State's difficulties with regard to soldier settlement.



⁸⁰ Annual Report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement For 1926-27, T. J. P. P., Vol XCVII, 1927-28, paper No 45.

Chapter Nine.

The End.

Belton's dogged determination to implement Labor's promised revaluations gave heart to many a struggling settler, their status as victim at last publicly acknowledged in the Government's offer of financial relief. But not all settlers were pleased by the Government's offer. Especially those settlers who had taken up orchards were concerned that the Government's offer did not go far enough. While pleased that revaluations were to be based on a property's productive capacity, rather than its purchase price, they were still worried by the Government's lack of assistance with both the transportation and marketing of fruit. More ominous still for orchardists was the Government's decision to cease offering advances to settlers, most orchardists being able to continue from one season to the next only on the strength of such advances. To such farmers as these revaluations appeared more a palliative than a solution.

By June 1927 the process of revaluations was complete, costing £210 000.¹ But the Government's hope that such a loss would permanently remove the financial incubus of soldier settlement was soon dashed. Settlers' arrears still stood at a disconcerting £211 277 and a further £33 375 was written off through revaluations. The annual loss in 1926-27 stood at a worrying £83 080.² Such figures convinced Hurst that the State's difficulties would not be solved by revaluation, even if coupled to a tighter administration. He believed all State efforts would prove useless without Commonwealth assistance. That Hurst had to report a staggering loss on soldier settlement of £93 941 in the following year merely provided impetus for such conviction. Tasmania had, by June 1928, suffered a total loss of £1 154 33³ on its soldier settlement scheme.

While revaluations had held the promise of a more prosperous future for both the settlers and the State the reality seems to have been otherwise. Between 1926 and 1927 eleven Huon settlers were forced to vacate their properties and the cost of soldier settlement remained

¹ Annual Report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement For 1926-27, T. J. P. P., Vol XCVII, 1927-28, Paper No 45.

² *ibid.*

³ Annual report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement 1927-28, T. J. P. P., Vol XCIX, 1928-29, paper No 30.

unrelenting. Despite revaluations those settlers continuing on their properties sank deeper into debt. Revaluations may have lowered rates of interest but without an income such reductions in themselves gave little to the settler.

These continued difficulties forced the government to consider further forms of assistance to settlers. Following completion of revaluations the government established a new Closer Settlement Board in May 1927. Two members of the old Board, Hurst and P. J. Perry, retained their positions: Hurst continued as President. The government appointed Carmichael Lyne as its representative and A. D. Cooper to represent the soldiers. The new Board acted immediately to address the many grievances, either on the Board's part or the settlers, that remained from revaluations. Their investigations revealed that the settlers' main concern now centred upon their difficulty in repaying both interest and capital on advances for buildings. The Board soon realised that despite revaluation, most settlers would still find it impossible to repay loans over that 25 year period allowed for under the Act. In early 1928 the Government altered the terms and conditions that related to the whole of the settlers' debt; granting a flat rental for three years on interest and advances, suspending arrears for the same period interest free, and reducing interest on land and buildings to a flat rate of 5%. The Board was convinced the Government's revaluations and its review, when coupled with the new terms and rates of interest, would ensure the success of the genuine trier. Such an assessment had by now become cliché.

There can be no doubt the government and the Board were genuine in their attempts to help the remaining settlers. But such moves still failed to acknowledge the basic difficulty most settlers faced when attempting to make a living from their farms. As the government lacked either the capacity or the initiative to help settlers market their produce many no doubt came to regard such offers of assistance as more of a symbolic gesture than a practical aid. Varying the rates of interest did little to ensure a settler received a reasonable return for his efforts.

Certainly this was the continued experience of those men who had taken up orchards in the Huon. The vagaries of the weather and the export markets ensured their existence remained generally desperate - if not impossible. Indeed the 1926 and 1927 seasons proved the worst yet for these settlers, Inspector G. Edwards in 1926 reporting "another bad

season owing to the coal strike in England, (with) many settlers receiving accounts instead of cheques for fruit shipments."⁴ Inspector J. W. R. Cairns reported "the returns coming to hand (to be) very poor, in some cases the grower being in debt. With the exception of those who sent the larger portion of their crop f. o. b. the season is disastrous, and I feel greatly concerned over the position of some of our settlers."⁵

Cairns's fears were shared by the Huon branch of the R. S. L. In September 1926 it held a special meeting to discuss the effect of such a ruinous season on its members. One returned man told the meeting that after having paid for his freight and labour he had received a paltry return of £5.18s, a return that ensured his position would be hopeless now that he was required to pay for spray and manure for the coming season. Indeed, the meeting believed the situation would remain impossible for most orchardists until the Government acted to ease the financial burden involved in the marketing of their fruit. All offers of extended loans or further advances were rejected as it was held such measures merely added to the overall level of a settler's debt. What was needed, so it was argued, was a mechanism to catch those speculators in the industry who "wedged (their) bloated carcass in between the auctioneer and the distributor."⁶ The orchardists believed they had little hope of success unless the Government acted immediately to remedy their grievances.

Whatever the government did, it was too late for some. In November 1926 Cyril Batchelor from Cradoc wrote to the Board to surrender his property. Facing mounting debt and at the mercy of what he considered to be an unfair marketing system he had reached the end:

Last year through taking notice of Mr Thomas' reports (the fruit Inspector) I shipped all fruit to England on consignment; result, bankruptcy. No help after several applications. Unable to stay on property and do necessary work. The crop showing this year will not be worth £20. What can a person do in an unequal contest of this description. I will expect your Inspector Mr Cairns to take

⁴ Annual Report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement for 1925-26, T.J. P. P., Vol XCV, 1926-27, Paper No 28.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *Huon Times*, September 14 1926.

over property at or on January 15 1927.⁷

The 1927 season proved wickedly ironical. Growers, blessed by a generous growing season, had picked a bumper crop. It was to prove their undoing. As Cairns despairingly reported:

orchardists have had very large crops, and consequently low prices asked, with the exception of a few who sold f. o. b. are having a disastrous season. English returns up to date are low, and interstate markets are returning very low prices.⁸

By 1927 it had become clear to the Tasmanian government that the continuing losses on soldier settlement still remained a significant threat to the economic viability of the State. Hurst, in his annual report, informed Parliament that unless the Commonwealth was prepared to offer a greater level of assistance to the State then soldier settlement would continue as a mill stone around the taxpayer's neck.⁹ It was a situation not unique to Tasmania. Every Australian state, to a greater or lesser extent, was experiencing difficulties akin to Tasmania's. The matter was the main subject of a conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers held in Sydney in July 1927¹⁰ following which the Commonwealth appointed Justice Herbert Pike to inquire into the administration and financial difficulties that States faced over such settlement and to recommend "the principles upon which a final adjustment in respect of losses shall be made with the States."¹¹

George Herbert Pike was an apt choice for the position. Born in Hobart in 1866 he had left with his parents for Sydney in 1883. There he had worked in the survey branch of the Department of Lands while studying law part time. Admitted to the N.S.W. Bar in 1892, he decided to specialise in land law, no doubt a reflection of his earlier interest in surveying. In 1921 he was appointed first judge of the N.S.W. Land and Valuation Court and in 1929, sole Royal Commissioner for the Commonwealth Government's inquiry into soldier settlement

⁷ AB19/28/691.

⁸ Annual Report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement For 1927-28, "op. cit."

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Ministerial Statement of the Minister for Lands, Works, and Agriculture, and Minister Controlling Forestry, T. J. P. P., Vol XCIX 1928-1929, Paper No 17., at p.4.

¹¹ Report On Losses Due to Soldier Settlement By Mr. Justice Pike, C. P. P., General Session 1929, Vol 11, paper No 46.

losses.¹²

In January 1928 Pike journeyed to Hobart to investigate Tasmania's resettlement scheme. While the government, the Board and individual settlers happily offered evidence the R. S. L., for reasons unstated, declined to participate. Pike's investigations determined that of the original 1 976 settlers soldiers settled in Tasmania only 777 or, 39%, now remained on their properties. Only Queensland had suffered a loss that came near Tasmania's and there some 60% of settlers still remained on their farms. Pike found the total loss to Tasmania on soldier settlement to have been £1 321 169 of which the Commonwealth, having already contributed £546 688, should now pay £113 897 as a final reckoning.

While Pike was impressed by the fair and reasonable nature of the state's resettlement scheme, especially the generous nature of its revaluations and concessions, he was nevertheless concerned by what he considered to be the settlers lack of an adequate living area. Indeed, Pike considered this to be the main problem that the remaining settlers had to face. While such a claim directly contradicted the findings of the 1926 Royal Commission, both at least agreed that the prices paid for properties had been at largely inflated valuations, though Pike found the cause of such a situation to have been primarily the result of the State's lack of arable land rather than any untoward interference on any vendor's part. Pike was also convinced that the State's problems in this area were suddenly compounded by the immediate downturn in its economy, noting that:

The large losses in (Tasmania) are largely due to the heavy fall in prices asked for hay, potatoes, peas and oats, and to the fact that to a large extent small cultivated farms and orchards were purchased for soldiers, and were therefore, liable to depreciate rapidly if not farmed and cultivated in the best possible manner.¹³

Such a finding only added considerable urgency to Tasmania's claims for relief.

In late May 1929 Nationalist Premier J. C. McPhee, who had come to office following Lyons's defeat in the 1928 election, travelled to Sydney for final discussions with Pike before the latter delivered his

¹² *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, Vol 11 1988, pp. 231-232.

¹³ Pike, "op. cit.", p.19.

recommendations to the Commonwealth Government. At that meeting Pike sought specific assurances from McPhee that he would provide Tasmania's remaining soldier settlers with adequate living areas, Pike utterly convinced the remaining settlers had little hope of success otherwise. Pike evidenced his claim by reference to the Campania Estate which he believed provided the settlers with only 1/3 of the land deemed necessary for a living.

Pike's request for an expansion of the settlers' "living area" initially met strong opposition from McPhee, the latter more prepared to argue the causes of failure than the future direction of government policy.¹⁴ Indeed, McPhee's reluctance underlined that continued Nationalist inability to accept responsibility, in part or in whole, for the failure of resettlement, and clearly marked a return to that long held Nationalist belief that factors other than early Nationalist stewardship had led to the scheme's failure. It was a position entirely consistent in a party that held itself to be the "natural" managers of Tasmania - a party that believed itself to epitomise all that was financially prudent and responsible in administration. But any reluctance on McPhee's part was quickly overcome by Pike's threat that no federal monies would be forthcoming until McPhee acceded to the request. As Pike told McPhee "unless I can report to the Commonwealth that the State has undertaken to do this,...I cannot recommend the Tasmanian debt be considered."¹⁵ McPhee's reaction was instantaneous:

You can take it from me we will put that matter in hand at once. We will...see that it is done. It will be an exhaustive examination of the whole position, and each man will be given a living area. I cannot see any great difficulty, because things have come to the stage when we have to see that these men are properly settled.¹⁶

¹⁴ The transcript of this meeting between McPhee and Pike paints McPhee in a poor light: Pike clearly amused by the Premier's comments. That McPhee should admit to only a cursory reading of the report of the 1926 Royal Commission into soldier settlement, indeed one might doubt he ever read it, gave Pike cause for concern. McPhee's comment that "in Tasmania the initial development of the soldier settlement scheme was unfortunate, to use a modified expression" suggests he felt powerless in the face of those difficulties surrounding the whole question of soldier settlement. Such an attitude doubtless inspired small confidence in the remaining settlers.

¹⁵ PD1/469/176/3/29, 22 May 1929.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

At the end of June 1929 Pike received yet another deputation from Tasmania, this time from two Board members, Hurst and Fielding,¹⁷ the latter a temporary replacement for Carmichael Lyne who had died. Hurst and Fielding had travelled to Sydney in the hope Pike might consider a further Tasmanian claim of \$663 417 on soldier settlement leases as a result of the government's recent decision¹⁸ to grant settlers a flat rental and write off the total value of houses and other depreciable improvements on resettlement properties. The claim met with little sympathy from Pike who believed "an allowance of \$30 000 ... would fairly meet any possible claims."¹⁹ Pike told Hurst and Fielding he was convinced that after the government had provided the settlers with an adequate living area their futures should be assured. Hurst remained unconvinced.

In his report to Parliament for 1928-29 Hurst advised the government to reject Pike's final recommendation believing it would penalise Tasmania by approximately \$8 770 a year. Hurst felt Pike's offer failed to acknowledge that "Tasmania, as one of the poorest of the states, (had been) forced to borrow more largely per head of population than...her richer neighbours."²⁰ It effectively meant Tasmania would be forced to carry losses on soldier settlement in perpetuity. The Government chose to ignore Hurst's advice. For the Commonwealth soldier settlement was at an end.

By 1930 only 49 of the 158 soldiers (31%) who had taken up properties in the Huon remained on their orchards. A further seven of these would surrender their leases by 1935.²¹ The transfer of soldier settlement leases to the Agricultural Bank in 1931 and further revaluations in the early 1930s offered some relief to those who remained, but their continued existence proved a struggle. What explanation can be offered for their survival? The task is not an easy one and no certainty can be placed upon the findings which are at best generalizations. The deeper truth, no doubt, lies hidden in the daily experiences of the settlers

¹⁷ Pike, "op. cit.", p.14.

¹⁸ See p.209 of thesis.

¹⁹ Pike, "loc. cit."

²⁰ Annual Report of the Department of Lands, Surveys, and Closer Settlement For 1928-29, T. J. P. P., Vol CI 1929-30, Paper No 39.

²¹ Figure derived from AB19 files on settlers in the Huon.

themselves, experiences to which we no longer have access. In many ways the successful settlers proved the mirror image of the unsuccessful. However there were at least five potentially significant differences between the successes and "failures":²²

(1) No successful settler took up his property before 1919. These eleven pre 1919 settlers presumably abandoned their farms because of ill health and/or the Board's purchases of doomed properties.

(2) Though the figures must necessarily be treated with great caution they indicate that 32% of successful settlers compared to only 8% of unsuccessful settlers, purchased their properties from relatives. The figures on both sides were almost certainly higher, but the differential probably operated in favour of the survivors. There were definite advantages for any settler who purchased his property from a parent or relative. Such purchases often provided a settler with ready access to much needed capital, derived from the sale of the family property. Indeed, in many cases evidence suggests families saw resettlement as merely an opportunity to pass on a property to a son while gaining financial advantage from the transfer. In purchasing a property from the family a settler also gained access to vital knowledge of the property, to a ready source of unpaid, or at least cheap labour, to shared plant and equipment and likely assistance in the marketing of their produce.

(3) Some 41% of successful settlers invested personal capital in the purchase of their property. Only 12% of the unsuccessful settlers were able or willing to make such an investment.

(4) The average size of a settler's property in the Huon was a mere 8.3 acres. While the unsuccessful settlers tended to take up properties which were nearer to this average the successful tended to hold larger properties. However this difference only reflects the average: any case by case analysis renders the situation more complicated and less certain.

(5) While it would be impossible to provide any specific figures it is clear that the orcharding experiences of the successful settlers was notably greater than that of the unsuccessful. Certainly the majority (63%) of successful settlers claimed to have had long experience of either orcharding or farming whereas only (43%) of the unsuccessful claimed such experience, and then often as a labourer rather than as an owner. Of course many settlers in applying for properties no doubt

²² *ibid.*

provided information which they believed would enhance their prospects and so their claims must be taken with some caution. The Royal Commission's observations on settler's testimonials underlines the need for such caution. Nevertheless a close study of pertinent files does indicate a correlation between experience and success, confirming common-sense assumptions.

While the above points neatly fit the profile of the successful settler which might be drawn from both the Tasmanian government's Royal Commission and Pike's Commonwealth report, they still somehow remain inherently unsatisfactory in offering a complete explanation for a settler's success or failure. Indeed, any discussion upon the failure of soldier settlement that concentrates too closely on the settlers' experiences runs the risk of transferring responsibility for the scheme's failure to the settler when clearly it lay with state and federal governments. The settlers were political pawns, and as such their natural fate was "failure"; they were the victims of the situation, rather than masters of their fates. The Tasmanian Soldier Settlement Scheme was fundamentally flawed from its very conception. As A. G. Ogilvie noted in 1926 "like a crippled child, it never had a chance."²³ Just as these soldiers were used as pawns in War, so they were in the politics of peace.

²³ *Mercury*, November 25 1926.

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^{1A} Huon Railway: Report of Select Committee with Minutes of proceedings and Evidence, T. J. P. P., Vol 1X, 1886, Paper No 138.

^{1B} *Mercury*, October 25 1910; PWD 214/41.

^{4A} *Huon Times*, August 8 1914.

^{4B} T. J. P. P., Vol LXXVII, 1917, p289.

^{11A} *Huon Times*, July 13 1923.

^{11B} *Huon Times*, January 30; February 20; March 10, 31; June 19, 30; December 15 1915.

^{13A} Such rate of rejection in the Huon (44%) was somewhat better than the State-wide average for early 1915 of 65% as given by Lake (*A Divided Society* p8) but is consistent with the final State-wide average of 44% for 1915-16 as given by Broinowski (*Tasmania's War Record 1914-18* p6). The eventual lessening of physical standards witnessed a consequent reduction in the rejection rate to 35% in 1917 (Broinowski p8). Hughes's 1916 decision to enlist all eligibles for military service, a decision made in anticipation of a successful "Yes" vote in the 1916 Conscription Referendum, evidenced a Commonwealth rejection rate of 38%. (Proclamation Calling Up Men: Return Showing Results, C. P. P., Vol 11, 1914-15-16-17, p215).

Chapter Two.

^{3A} As Robson notes (*A History of Tasmania: Vol 11* p 237), Earle believed such land monopolies to be partially responsible for Tasmania's population loss and consequent lack of development.

^{13A} PD1/302/212/1/15, 20 September 1915.

^{19A} *Huon Times*, November 6 1915.

^{20A} Joshua Thomas Whitsitt: Born in Ireland in 1869, he emigrated to Tasmania in 1897 where he briefly worked for the Bank of Australasia before becoming the manager/secretary of the Blyth River Iron Mine and a farmer near Cooe. Implacably opposed to the Labor Party's socialist principles he was an independent MHA for Darwin from 1909-1922, and MHR for Darwin 1922-1925. Described by Robson (*A History of Tasmania: Vol III* p320) as "a northern Irishman and erratic" and by Reynolds (Green, *A Century of Responsible Government in Tasmania*, p219) as a "sardonic Irish humorist" he at times held the balance of power in State Parliament, a situation that bestowed upon Whitsitt a position beyond his abilities. His notorious unpredictability did little to ensure stability within State parliaments of the time. Whitsitt died at Cooe in 1943.

Chapter Three.

^{1A} *Huon Times*, March 21, 24 1916.

^{2A} This hardening of class divisions would largely result from the rapid rise in the price of essential foodstuffs from 1914 onwards and from the widely held belief amongst many of the unemployed timber workers in Esperance that the war in Europe was, at heart, a titanic struggle for world capitalist supremacy. Such beliefs received undoubted support

from the seemingly anti-worker judgements delivered by exemption courts in the Huon in 1916 and from the widely touted claim that a successful referendum on conscription in 1916 would inevitably lead to economic conscription. (For Tasmania generally see Lake, *A Divided Society* pps 233-234.)

3A *Huon Times*, July 7 1916.

10A *Huon Times*, July 8, 21 1916.

11A *Huon Times*, February 15 1916.

18A *Huon Times*, February 15 1916.

36A David Edward Dicker (1882-1967) was arguably one of Tasmania's most radical unionists and parliamentarians. An early Australian Workers Union organiser and secretary of the Timber Workers Union he was a Labor Party member for Franklin from 1909-1922. A leading anti-conscriptionist, tried in 1917 for 'disloyal utterances', he was expelled from the Labor Party in 1922.

37A For details of cases see *Huon Times*, October 20 1916 (Cygnet), October 24 1916 (Huonville, Franklin and Geeveston.)

Chapter Four.

14A While the onset of war had led to restricted markets for fruit exports and emphasised the importance of mainland markets (see p9) the apple industry had not as yet been crippled by the war.

15A *Huon Times*, April 20 1917.

17A *Huon Times*, October 2, 23 1917; September 25 1917.

18A *Huon Times*, November 2 1917.

24A While any explanation of the referendum reversal in Cygnet must regard the Catholic vote as "particularly significant", the *Huon Times's* silence on the matter precludes certainty.

25A *Huon Times*, November 27 1917.

37A *Huon Times*, March 1, 12 1918.

39A *Huon Times*, March 26 1918.

41A *Huon Times*, February 8 1918.

Chapter Five.

1A This maximum selling price referred to a case of apples.

9A *Huon Times*, March 21 1919.

22A *Huon Times*, January 23 1920.

25A *Huon Times*, June 5 1920.

25B *Huon Times*, June 18 1920.

28A *Huon Times*, June 18 1920. It would perhaps be more accurate to suggest "still-born", the P. H. F. C. management refusing to enter into any arrangement with Jones and his allies. Consequently two export groupings emerged in 1921 - the P. H. F. C. and those linked with Jones.

40A PD1/372/78/9/22, 24 March 1922; *Huon Times*, December 3, 7 1920

41A *Huon Times*, March 13 1919; November 23 1920; January 7, May 13 1921.

46A *Huon Times*, December 20 1921.

63A *Mercury*, August 24 1922; September 26 1922

64A *Huon Times*, January 17, 31 1922.

64B *Huon Times*, May 23 1922.

66A *Huon Times*, May 25, August 27 1921; May 27, July 2 1922; January 12 1923.

68A *Huon Times*, January 30 1923.

73A *Huon Times*, January 25 1924.

74A *Huon Times*, February 12 1924.

76A *Huon Times*, July 4 1924.

Chapter Six.

A1 Returned Soldiers' and Closer Settlement Board Report for 1918-1919, T. J. P. P., Vol LXXI, 1919-1920, Paper No 58.

A2 *Mercury*, February 28 1922.

42A *Huon Times*, January 7 1921.

42B *Ibid*, February 7 1919.

52A *The World*, November 30 1920; *Mercury*, December 2 1920.

59A *The World*, August 10 1921.

88A *The World*, August 2 1922. Blyth's move placed the Labor party in a quandary, resolved by Caucus's decision to support Lee. Doubtless Caucus believed Lee's lack of economic acumen would provide a boost to Labor's electoral prospects.

99A The significance of this seemingly small deficit, when contrasted with the total state debt of twenty one million pounds (see p95) must not be underestimated. By June 1923 the State's total expenditure and debt on soldier settlement had reached some £3 603 266: (£ 2 470 266 expended on resettlement; £ 232 000 deficit for 1922-23; £ 500 000 Commonwealth Loan to fund deficit and total loss on scheme to June 1923 of £401 000) This represented some 17% of the State's total debt. To compound this situation the Commonwealth Rebate on soldier settlement costs was to cease in 1929 - following which the state would be expected to fund all such debt entirely from its own resources. Tasmania's losses on soldier settlement had by 1930 reached some £1 320 635. The responsibility for this debt was to be an acrimonious point between the Federal and State Governments for years to come.

Chapter Seven.

1A This figure is based upon the total number of settlers who would eventually vacate their properties: that is 109 settlers.

2A See annual Closer Settlement Board reports of the Local Inspectors for Area 4 (Huon) for 1921-1925.

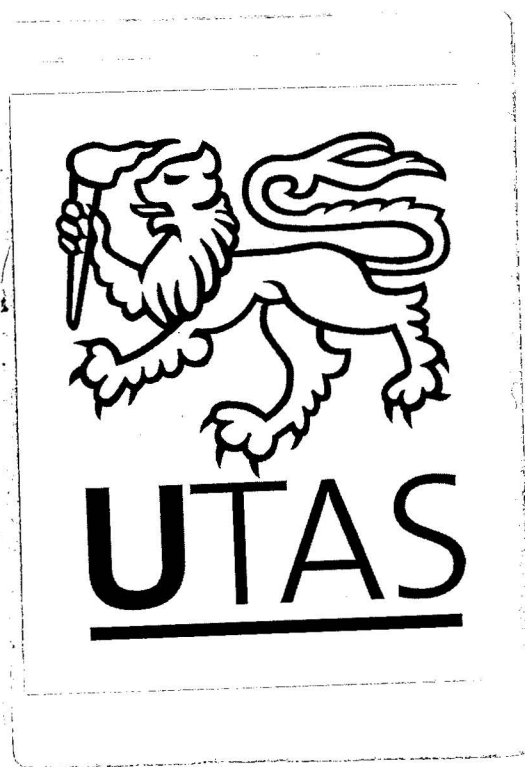
37A See RC/1 at pps 8 and 10 and Report on Losses Due to Soldier Settlement By Mr. Justice Pike, C. P. P., General Sessions 1929, Vol 11, paper No 46, p21.

Chapter Eight.

^{16A} *Mercury*, April 30 1926

^{25A} Indeed the Closer Settlement Board had called for such action, as was made clear to the Royal Commission. See RC 37/1 at pps 14 and 15.

^{48A} Such extravagant use of hyperbole on Meagher's part does not negate the essential kernel of truth implicit in his observations.



qualifications might be anything from perfection to nothing, or worse.⁵⁶

Such a situation stemmed from the Government's inadequate selection procedures. Indeed, the Commission placed heavy emphasis on this point, believing it to have been the central cause of the scheme's failure. As it noted, "only the selection of a man suitable in every way for each farm could have saved, if anything could have saved, the scheme. But the men were not selected at all."⁵⁷ The selection process proved to be simplicity itself. Soldiers wanting to take up a farm had only to approach prominent members of the community for testimonials, present these to the Government and be given a farm. Such a process implicitly suggested that "every soldier who wanted a farm ought to have one."⁵⁸ The Commission held these testimonials to be worthless. They failed to take into account either the physical or mental capacity of the soldiers, their sobriety, or their farming or business skills. They provided no guarantee the settler was industrious or honest and made no attempt to ascertain whether the intending settler had capital or not. In the Commission's view:

With land bought at prices fixed by the facts...we have set forth, and then handed to men "selected" in the fashion just described, nothing but calamitous failure could be possible.⁵⁹

As if this were not sufficient, the Commission found, the Government had made no provision to provide training to those soldiers it had "selected".

While the Commission found the price of land to have been too high and the settlers subject to no adequate process of selection it remained convinced that the farms purchased were generally of a type to support a settler and his family, given of course that "he could (have gotten) it at a sufficient price, and if he had the necessary skills and strength."⁶⁰ It was, to say the least, a paradoxical finding. An equally paradoxical finding was the Commission's rejection of any suggestion that the involvement of Municipal Councils in land selection had led to increased

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.